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THE WHITE THREAD

THE WHITE THREAD

A Novel

BY

ROBERT HALIFAX

AUTHOR OF "A SLICE OF LIFE," "A WHISTLING WOMAN," "LOW SOCIETY," "THE BORDERLAND," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

TILLY, wearing neat black-cotton gloves, and carrying an umbrella and a small hand-bag, had come along the passage very briskly; but on the threshold of the kitchen she paused, as with an inward sinking sensation, her lips setting.

"Where's mother?" she asked.

She did not seem to expect an answer, and none was vouchsafed. Gideon, the small brother who had flung open the front door and galloped back to the kitchen without a word, was too concerned with the immediate business in hand. His tongue slyly thrust out and curled, he was prowling on all fours around the room in the manner of a stealthy ape in a cage, and needing but an arched tail to make the performance truly and uncomfortably lifelike. His audience—a man who sat with his legs dangling through a gap in the floorboards—watched him round and round with a vast, silent interest that amounted almost to fascination.

Tilly advanced a step or so, put down her traveling equipment, and stood gazing about her again, as if awed and hurt at experiencing a sudden chilly sense of "respectability"—a strangeness in the very familiarity of these surroundings. She had been gone from the Porter Street home just four months, and this was her third return duty-visit. But her previous two visits had oc-

curred on a Sunday, and were known well in advance; this was in the nature of a surprise, at midday on a Monday—a very different thing.

"Who let *you* in?" she demanded almost sharply of the audience. "Whatever are *you* supposed to be up to?"

Bob Kingdom, although big enough to contain energy sufficient for two ordinary men, seldom spoke when a mild gesture would serve. Leisurely he pointed a plumbing implement toward the prowling Gideon, and then pointed it down into the hole that contained his legs.

"Yes, I can see you're carving the place up," retorted Tilly; "but what's it *for?*"

"Water-pipe leaking like billy-o under the boards," murmured Gideon, whose strenuous efforts aside were being wasted. "She can't see it; she's barmy to the bone; never mind her."

For a moment Tilly looked as if about to cry; then, with a determined little jerk of her chin, she peeled off her gloves and drew the pins from her hat. If small, she was plump to tubbiness, and, for her age, surprisingly matronly in manner.

"Seems to me as if a burglar's only got to knock and walk in here," she remarked, aloofly. "Never mind; I'm here, and I'm going to stay, and see what you're all up to. Monday morning—ah, yes; I needn't have asked where mother is. The old game begun again, I suppose, now I'm out o' the way. Now, then, where's this leak you're talking about? How long's it been going on, and all the rest of it?"

She peered down into the hole deeply, suspiciously. She knew Bob Kingdom well enough—almost every one in that zone of Stepney was familiar with his big figure, baby-like face, slow stride and air of ruminative detachment; but she had a knack of liking to know just what was what, even in details. The dust-laden sunlight, streaming in slantwise at the uncurtained window,

showed her merely the musty, stuffy depth that any one would expect to find below-floor.

"Funny I can't see anything of it," she said. "That's no good to me"—as Bob Kingdom tapped a pipe-joint down there with his implement. "Oh, I see—I beg pardon," as he tilted one or two of the boards he had prised up, and showed her a layer of mildew and fungi on their under side. "That doesn't look over-healthy, does it? Well, a very good job we didn't have a Brussels carpet down to be ruined; that's one advantage of bare boards, ain't it? Stop it, Giddy, do!—you're getting a right down disgrace, you are. Whatever next?"

He had crawled round behind her, thrust his head under her skirts as she stooped, and protruded it in front to the astonished gaze of Bob Kingdom. As she gave the downward slap he glided away like an eel, and recommenced his interrupted animal studies.

"Barmy," he was hear to murmur again to himself. "What's she want to come home here for? Look at her old umbrella!—where'd she pinch that from?"

Bob Kingdom's great body shook like a jelly on a jolted table. Fortunate in his phlegmatic and placid outlook, he was doubly fortunate in being a plumber employed by the Water Company, and therefore presumably able to take his own time. Indeed, no one ever attempted to goad him to haste, because it seemed like trying to shift a mountain with one's hands. Bob Kingdom, in his small local world, was "taken for granted" in everything. Given his own way, and his own intervals of knotty reflection, it was known that he could repair a joint as capably and enduringly as any man living.

In this case, he had seen fit to cut away quite three feet of the piping.

"Bad, eh? Perished," he observed, showing it to her. "Reckon whole lot ought to come up."

"Anything else?" said Tilly, stiffly. "If the Company

want a job, let 'em find my father and mother a couple o' new rooms while they do it."

"Indoor pipe—not ours," he explained, never to be ruffled. "Landlord pays. Who's he?"

"Ah, now you're asking something," she said. "Whoever he is, I know he won't pay anything—not without they get him down on his haunches and drag it from him like a bad tooth. When the ceiling came down on Giddy's bed, and filled his eyes and nose and mouth with muck, and might have killed him if he hadn't been lying with his feet on the pillow, they only laughed and said it was all in the day's march."

"That sort, eh?" mused Bob Kingdom. "What name?"

"Goodness knows," said Tilly. "Puzzle any one to say who *is* the landlord, one month from another. You want to have a good look at 'em, if they come down for it after dusk—at least, I should now, if I was back home again. All these lovely rabbit-hutches belonged to some Grand Duke or other, till he let them out to some other snatcher in a top hat, and *he* let them out again to some one else —all at a quick profit each time—till you can't say who's going to step up for the rent. All I know is, these houses fetch a much bigger rent now than my mistress pays for hers in Highbury; and she'd call this a pigsty. I call it a shame. But, there, such is life, I'm beginning to think."

She steered round him to the scullery beyond, with the air of one who could now see things from the point of view of an onlooker. Her hands on her swelling little hips, she surveyed the barren eight-by-six containing the copper and sink.

"My word, mother!" she said to herself. "Gets worse and worse. What's the use o' me stinting to send home two shillings a week? Look at it! Two crocky saucepans—and both 'run,' with a rag stuffed through the hole; and my missis has got over twenty—all enamel or steel. Break your heart, if you'd let it. Poor father!—

what's he think of it all?" She turned, recollecting something—a wheezy little clock that had used to stand on the kitchen mantelshelf. "Oh!—*that's* gone, has it? Yes, we're going on all swimming, we are. You *could* tell to within an hour or so what the time was, when I had the looking-after of things. Ah, well, I mustn't worry—that won't help 'em much."

There seemed nothing whatever to do here—nothing to put in order with the deftness and skill of her new experience, as she had vaguely anticipated. She sat down perforce on the edge of a chair, her hands folded loosely on her lap, and waited. At any rate, it was a semi-novel sensation to sit there supine like a wooden idol; and even more odd to reflect that there was no "upstairs" whatever—at least, not as far as she was concerned. A dull bump, the slam of a door, or a child's muffled crying, now and then could be heard from the floors overhead; but these floors—three in number—were all occupied by different sets of tenants, the front door being the only item in common.

"That's one thing about father," Tilly observed more cheerfully, as she glanced up at the forestry of cracks in the ceiling: "he always stuck to a ground floor; and I don't blame him, not now I've come to think a bit. You don't want to be caged in on top of a lot o' people who go to bed half addled and strike matches to see what's become o' the bedclothes. One night here 'ud send my mistress into terrible convulsions, I should say; she'd never believe it. Father all right?" it occurred to her to query of Gideon. "*You* don't seem to be worrying much about anything."

Gideon, who was licking the wall *à la* an ant-bear at the moment, gave her an arch, pitying side-look, but had no time or breath for speech.

"Enough o' that," urged his sister, half sadly. "Do you hear what I said? Is father all right?—is he at work?"

"He went out," Gideon paused in his licking to pant.

"Went out!" she repeated. "And that's all you know or care. So long as he drags home with a few shillings from somewhere on Saturday, that's all any one troubles. Yes, you're mad," she added, mournfully, made to watch as Gideon dropped, curled himself into a ball like a hedgehog, and rolled across the floor. "Stop him. Mr. Kingdom!—he'll be down that hole, and we should never see any more of him. . . . Yes, you're mad; or you soon will be. One in the fam'ly ain't enough. You're going the same way as your poor brother—fast."

"Which one's that?" Bob Kingdom was moved to query. He had noticed that she fumbled at her skirts as if to find the corner of an apron and draw it to her eyes.

"Which? There's only the one—Jimmy," Tilly said, using the back of her hand instead. "You don't remember him—no; or you've forgotten, if you do. Dead and gone, you are, once you're put away in them places, it seems. Well, there, you can't wonder. Mother's put four children under the ground, so I suppose she's got used to it, and can't rouse herself to trouble any more. She won't have to bury *him*—that's one thing. Yes; he's in the 'Overflow,' and he'll never come out of it now—'cept it's to be clapped into another one a little farther off. There'll be nowhere to put 'em all soon, I should say. Half the world 'll be in the 'sylum, and the other half minding 'em."

"Oh?" Bob Kingdom's concentrated stare, like that of a cow gazing over a hedge, suggested that he had been thinking of jail, but had not cared to say so. "Oh?" he repeated, his thick lips remaining apart. "That so, eh?" When he did grasp an idea with a rush, he held on to it for a long while, mentally turning it over and over for inspection. He was so impressed that he worked himself round on the flooring for another fixed gaze at the next likely asylum candidate—Gideon.

"Looks more like a little goblin or devil now than a proper human being, don't he?" said Tilly, biting her lip as if to keep back a useless choke. "Think he's like me at all—in looks?"

"Might be more so," considered Bob Kingdom slowly, surveying her in turn. "No; he's all on his own in looks, I should say."

Tilly's sob broke. "He's the living spit of his brother—Jimmy," she wailed, both hands to her face. "I can see him going the same way—fast. I shall be the only one left. And then father 'll give way and crack up with a rush. I've tried not to, but I can see it all coming. It does seem hard, when you work hard for five-and-nine a week, and try to be cheerful, and know what's going on, and can't even hope for the best, as other people do."

If Gideon Westaway had heard, he was not in the least appalled by the forecast. Beyond any doubt just then, as he simulated a cat with its back curved in the air, and looked round at them with a crafty smile to gauge the effect, he came under the diabolical heading hinted at by his sister. Singularly slender and sinuous of body, he had a small, peaked, white face and a smooth bulging forehead, above which the hair grew like a skull-cap of tiny black bristles planted with mathematical precision. And, by contracting certain muscles that seemed to Tilly unnatural, he could move the arch of his scalp to and fro as if it were a sliding plate. He did most of his talking with his eyes; and, above all, he seemed quite happy in his mute prowlings—in his dubious environment as a whole.

Tilly wiped her eyes, and dived a hand into her bag.

"He's left alone here for hours together—how can you wonder? What's he had for breakfast, I'd like to know? And what's he likely to get for dinner, by the look of it? A clip round the ear for looking hungry, I expect. I never did!" She found her small purse, and produced a sixpence. Gideon straightened up and tiptoed a step or

two, licking his lips. "Oh, no, it's not for you—don't think it," she said, very definitely, as his sticks of fingers twisted itchingly. "Listen to me! Take this, and get twopenn'orth o' stale buns at the corner. They're for me, mind; so be back in ten minutes with the change. Say you wanted one o' those dough-nuts with jam in the middle. Then, if they haven't got a stale one, they might drop in a fresh one—you never know. I've done it, before now."

Gideon reached the door, but, with the coin safely clutched, had to turn on a freakish impulse. He stuck his face close to Bob Kingdom's.

"You're a white negro, you are. Yah!" he whispered.

However apt, it did not happen to be original; and Bob Kingdom, conceivably susceptible on that one point, gazed round at Tilly, as though he thought some one ought to be held responsible for this resurrected slight.

"Don't take any notice of him," Tilly said, hastily. "Gracious me, you're big enough and old enough to let 'em say anything they blessed well like. *I* am; I know that much. I've found there's deeper things than that to put up with; ah, that I have, just lately." She touched her eyes again, clearly having something in the background of her mind that day. "Why, you must be getting close on forty, Mr. Kingdom, aren't you?" she hurried on.

"That's a fact," he told her, his dirty, cherubimic face becoming absently ruminative again. "Yes, suppose I must be—near on forty." He looked down into his hole. "Time I settled down with some one, I suppose; but I haven't. Dunno why."

"I should say you *have* settled down," Tilly remarked. "I don't believe in any one marrying just for the sake of marrying, if that's what you mean."

"No?" he pondered, as if open to absorb advice. And Tilly sat very rigid.

"Certainly not," she said. "You see quite enough of

that all round you, don't you? People that have got to live together for a lifetime, and put up with each other's ways and tantrums, want something to *hold* 'em together, don't they?—or else they're always coming in two like a broken plate only half mended. Makes me wild to see all these bits of boys and girls ogling one another and playing at something they don't understand—something that ought to be serious to every one. They're laying something up for themselves, if they knew it."

"I s'pose so," ejaculated Bob Kingdom, who although apparently the very reverse of shy, had never attempted anything in that line himself. "Yes, you do see 'em at it, now you speak of it—'specially round the railway stations and bandstands, eh? S'pose they think it's the proper thing, eh?"

"Oh, no doubt it is," said Tilly, quickly, looking away. "But it generally turns out a mistake for all that. It's making a game of what ought to be something very different. I'd sooner keep as I am all my life than be tied up and miserable just for the sake of showing I *could* get married."

"Ditto me," said Bob Kingdom, very spontaneously, once he had grasped the thing. And Tilly, for some unknown reason, sniffed.

"It's a little bit different with a man," she qualified, softly. "A man can pick and choose—go out hunting about, I mean, till he *does* hit on some one that he could get to care for. A woman, without she flirts and shows what she is, has to sit back and wait. Men don't seem to like a woman that shows she's got her own feelings—not too quick, at any rate. And I suppose it was meant to be so."

"I s'pose so," said Bob Kingdom again, gaping in his contemplation of the point. "Rum world all round, when you look at it like that, eh?" he was inspired to add.

Tilly bounced up.

"No!" she replied. "Not at all—if you look at it properly. The world's all right enough, Mr. Kingdom: it's us that make it all wrong. When you want to go right, there's always somebody or something to pull you back. I'm sure, as I came along, I felt so happy—I don't know why—I fairly danced along the pavement. And then to come in and find this—just like a slap o' cold water in the face—and you're only laughed or stared at if you show you feel it. . . ."

Gideon panted in, and poured seven small buns from his cap on to the table. Tilly examined each one, to see if it had been nibbled at the edges; and then pushed them in a heap toward him.

"There, go on! You'll eat 'em all straight off, I know; so you'll have to chance whether they turn on you in the night. You don't often have a buster."

And Gideon, with a series of foxy grimaces at Bob Kingdom, slid into a corner with his banquet, taking a picturesque bite from each stale bun in turn. Incidentally, he had not mentioned the fourpence change; and Tilly, oddly enough for her, never noticed the omission.

"School?" interrogated Bob Kingdom, with a jerk of his head toward the banqueting corner.

"Goodness knows," said Tilly. "Don't look like it. I suppose I'm out of everything now—like Jimmy; no one troubles to write a line, even if I send a stamp. He went pretty regular at one time—when he wasn't sent home with a headache or his knickers torn off him. Then it seemed to drop. I s'pose they got sick and tired o' sending the man round after him—or else glad to get rid of him; you never know. He did all sorts o' things, I've heard. They kept him in by himself one day for drinking the ink; and came back and found him boiling a frog in the teachers' tea-kettle."

"Didn't boil it," corrected Gideon, placidly. "It jumped

out into the fire half way. Not going to school; I'm going to be a cowboy."

"You look it," commented his sister sorrowfully. "That shows you've stole twopence and been to the pictures. Cowboy! Last time I came home he was going to be a mounted p'liceman, and nothing else, if he starved."

"Decent job, if they'd take him—mounted police," said Bob Kingdom, looking a shade doubtful about it.

"Well, if they're half as important as they get themselves up, it must be," Tilly owned. "I'm sure, the one that does patrol past our house at Highbury every evening looks like a nabob in black plaster-of-paris; and the horse looks as if it was walking to its own fifty-pound funeral. Mother or father or any one been to see Jimmy lately—or any time at all since I left home? " she demanded shakily of Gideon, as if she had been keeping the question back until it boiled over.

"Dunno," he replied, honestly more concerned with balancing half a bun on his nose.

"Cruel shame," quavered Tilly. "I knew they'd drop it as soon as I wasn't here to speak. I meant to have an upset with 'em to-day about it; but p'raps it's no use. They know how he looks for some one coming, even if he can't seem grateful; they know what it's like, at any rate, being buried there; but if they could drop him as if he'd never been born and running about this kitchen—their own flesh and blood—well, nothing 'ud shame 'em. I dunno what they're made of; I dunno how they can sleep for thinking of him. There, I don't!"

"Can't she cry?" Gideon whispered to the room at large. "Only got to say 'Jimmy' to her, and she starts off. Silly fool!" And Tilly's outburst ceased at once.

"Yes, it's me that's the fool, no doubt," she agreed. "I oughtn't to have a heart; I dunno where I got it from. Never mind; he mayn't trouble any of you much longer;

there was only the shadder of him left when I went to see him last."

"Far to go, is it?" ventured Bob Kingdom.

"Far? What's that to do with it? It's their duty! Far? No; only a couple o' miles, at the most. Fact of it is, I suppose, it's got so common to have some one 'put away' that it's thought nothing of. You'd think so, at any rate, if you went there any day, and got in with all the people that stream up from all parts with a little parcel for some one inside. And that's only the 'Overflow.' Think of all the other hundreds o' places, and all the streams o' people—just think!"

"She's got it on the brain," suggested Gideon, commiseratingly. Tilly took no notice, albeit well aware of his talent for reproducing remarks dropped by other people in her absence.

"Rave much, do they?" muttered Bob Kingdom, who thought it was the essential word in the case, and seemed to be picturing a lot of wild beasts penned in a cage.

"Rave?" she echoed. "Dunno what you mean. Jimmy's quite as sane as you in most things—only a bit quiet, like, and thinks victuals and money grow o' themselves; and there's a few outside seem to do *that,* don't they? Rave? —no! They're all more or less sound, except in one or two little things that harm nobody; you'd be surprised, like I was. I suppose there are the noisy, dangerous ones somewhere; but not where Jimmy is—you hardly hear a sound, inside or out. Thank God he *is* there; and I'm only hoping they won't notice him and shift him on," she added, with a depth that showed how full she was of her subject.

"Like a home from home, eh?" said Bob Kingdom, encouragingly.

"Well, if you're thinking of this home, p'raps so!" she admitted. Her mental outlook, it was apparent, had been broadened considerably by four months in the superior

atmosphere of Highbury. "Course, most of 'em there are paid for—anything up to two pounds a week, they tell me; but it 'ud puzzle 'em to get two shillings out o' father and mother. So that's why I say, it was to be! When the ordinary 'sylum got crowded out, and all the others choked up too, they had to send a few from each to this place—and he happened to be one of 'em. That's why they call it the 'Overflow.' . . . Yes; the party I used to go with regular—the dearest, sweetest lamb of a woman I shall ever come across, I do know—pays ten shillings a week for her husband there, so that he shan't feel a pauper, and can have any extras that are going. Thank goodness, it don't occur to him to ask how she does it, and what *her* 'extras' are. Once in there, they all seem to forget how the money comes and goes. That's the mercy of it."

"What's *his* weak spot?" queried Bob Kingdom, still gazing at a picture in space.

"Haunted," said Tilly, in a reverent, far-away whisper. "Haunted, poor fellow!"

Presently she came to herself with a start, and settled back in her chair.

"Ah, well! Things generally come all right in the end, if you let 'em—don't they? Now then, mother, I'll give you just ten minutes more, and then I'm after you!"

CHAPTER II

THE minutes passed. Bob Kingdom, glancing round and seeing no timepiece, supposed Tilly must be counting them, as she sat so alertly still. Then up she got—just as Gideon, noting that Bob Kingdom's left ear had intercepted a quivering sunspot reflected from the window, crept round behind and focused a bit of burning glass on the ear.

"Enough o' that, Giddy; drop it! You're never doing anything, and yet you're always up to something. If you can't be a proper boy, do try and get ready to be a man. Now, then!" She drew on her hat, jacket and the cotton gloves—and then paused. "No, I won't," she said. "I won't give her away altogether." And she stripped them off again, and flung an apron over her shoulders in the approved Porter-Street mode. "Now p'raps nobody'll faint or have any remarks to pass. But I'll let her have a piece of my mind before I've done with her to-day. Things ain't going to drift altogether, just because I can't be in two places at once."

She marched steadily out into the sunlight and the drone of many small sounds intermingled, and passed down the pavement as if too full of business to notice the neighbors who, nearly all nursing a baby still in its scanty night attire, stood chatting from their respective doorways.

"Hullo, what, back home again, is she?" one called after her, as if stung by the neglect. "There, now! Thought she was such a wonder, and was cartin' the

master out for walks while the missis got a nap. Soon sick o' bein' buried alive, ain't she?"

"Don't blame her," observed another with some sympathy, as she cuffed her baby for whining too persistently, and then squeezed and kissed it in several places. "I know I told my old cat off middlin' quick, the first place in service I took—and the last. Asked her if she thought she'd bought my lily-white soul as well as my body. Said I'd spread my own bread and margarine, same as she did her own toast an best butter; and wasn't goin' to be first up and the last to bed. Aha! Told her she didn't want no servant, but a cast-iron machine made to wind up and go for life; and I let her neighbors hear it, too. Then I bounced off home, and made her send my bag after me. Tuppeny duchess! Remember it as plain as if it was yesterday, 'cause mother carried on so that it cost her half-a-quartern o' gin to shove in my beer and keep me quiet. 'No more service for me,' I says. 'I'd sooner put in sixteen hours a day behind a pub. bar, and chance the customers' dirty talk.' It turned out to be a jam factory at the finish; but I did have my breather and my bit o' fun every evenin'; I did know I was alive, the same as her—the dressed-up cat!"

"I should say so," confirmed another, having no experience of her own to relate. "My gel ain't over-anxious to do anythin', so far as I can see; so I dunno what she'll drift into. But I'd as lief see her pick up with a soldier, as take on a slavey's job. There's that upstart niece o' mine—Lou Bunting—a bright beauty, too! She's been in and out fifty servant's places, if one. She knows her book by now. Says she always has a good 'screw' at the master first, to see what he's like, and don't care a rap about the missis. She works herself in with him all right, and then, when there's an upset about it, locks herself in the kitchen and laughs fit to split. And she

always comes off, mind you. In her last place, when she gave notice to go, she waited till the old man come in, and then walks up and says: 'Before I leave the premises, mum, does master know you take his trousers and fancy weskuts out o' the drawer and give 'em away at the front door reg'lar for a fourpenny plant in a pot?' That give 'em somethin' to go on with, when she'd gone. I tell you, she's a scorcher, my niece. But that's the on'y way to keep these 'would-be's' in their places."

At the foot of Porter Street runs the Row—a narrow, roughly paved marketing thoroughfare generally much congested, and with a thoroughly earned reputation for cheapness and quality combined. It being Monday, however, only a stall here and there was pitched, trying to dispose of Saturday's remnants; and an air of brooding and waiting and basking hung over all. Tilly glanced both ways, elected to wheel to the right, and came out into the spacious main road.

Her practiced, severe eye was directed at once to the big public-house at a corner opposite. She dived across. The doors, flung wide open, let out a buzz of animated talk, punctuated by heavy snatches of song. Tilly made for the roomy four-ale compartment, and picked her way among various babies who, supposed to be shepherded by slightly older children, crawled hither and thither about the threshold. Now and then one would intrude over the margin into the bar, and begin eating the sawdust, to be nearly trodden upon; when the disturbed mother would emerge and administer a remonstrative slap to the child left in charge of it. Thus the "Monday-ish" feeling was being beguiled away, in conditions almost perfect—sunshine above and four-ale within.

Tilly's parent, however, was not to be picked out. She had been there, said another woman, who had left it too late herself to return home and cook anything for

her husband's dinner; but had gone on to the "next house" quite a time since.

"How was she?" demanded Tilly.

"Oh, almost her usual self," said the woman reassuringly, if not proudly. "If she had a pint here, it's as much as she did have. Course, I can't answer for *since*, can I? She was with two others, and it don't take much to knock her over. I've had no breakfast myself yet."

"I'd make sure o' my supper, if I was you," said Tilly.

She tried the "next house," and the next, without results, and looked a little dejected and resigned as she retraced her steps. Half-way back up the Row, however, she halted, with a listening look.

From somewhere ahead came the sound of voices singing heartily, if without regard to unison and the strict music. It was a little difficult, from the sound alone, to judge the sex of the singers; but Tilly had her own idea, and waited. And presently they came into view. There were three of them—ladies—with arms linked affectionately and for safety. The fact that they occupied the whole width of the pavement was in no way resented; the Row pedestrians stepped out of the way and went on again as if quite used to the slight inconvenience. And the center figure was Mrs. Westaway's.

Her dark, thinning hair hung loose, and her face, turned well up to the sunshine, was very white—streaming with moisture, indeed. The other two, happening to be much younger women, held their skirts archly up to their knees, danced as they went, and beyond a doubt were steeped in the pure enjoyment and unrestrained freedom of the thing; but whether Mrs. Westaway could really share the feeling was not so clear. She seemed to think it incumbent upon her to sustain her part, and lifted her feet as high as she could, while singing in a see-saw voice upon two notes all the time; yet something

in her attitude seemed to implore her two companions not to let go, for fear of a debacle.

"Isn't it disgraceful?" said an elderly person, stepping from the pavement well in time. She had evidently taken advantage of the Row for purely shopping purposes.

"Isn't it?" retorted Tilly, who, although she had formed a surprisingly definite idea of her own upon the point just lately, resented the pity or contempt of outsiders. "You might be the same, if you were in her shoes, let me tell you. Yes, you!"

The happy trio came on, and reached the corner of Porter Street. Tilly held back, until certain that her mother, after only the merest vague hesitation, was being carried on past it; then she acted. Gliding up behind, with a swift downward sweep of her hands she cut the linked arms away and spun her mother sharply round.

"Enough o' this," she said. "You come on home. That's your place."

There was stupefaction for a instant, merging into recriminations—till Mrs. Westaway, dimly recognizing her daughter, began to whimper and to feel the need of some support.

"I should think so," said Tilly, with depth, taking her arm. "You know! Step out, do!"

"Let her enjoy herself, if she feels like it," expostulated one of the pair left. "She ain't hurting you, is she?"

"No," said Tilly, sticking her face close. "She's hurting herself—that's all. You let go, or I'll floor you where you stand. She's my mother—that's all."

That was enough; the singing of the pair died away down the pavement, and Tilly steered her capture safely around the corner. It was slow progress, as Mrs. Westaway, pricked by misgivings, paused at every few inches to try and throw her arms about her daughter's neck,

or, failing that, to escape; but Tilly impelled her coldly, determinedly, on. It was odd to feel her own ears tingling over the publicity of what had once seemed a trifle—especially as the neighbors kept up a dropping fire of remarks intended to minimize and encourage.

"She'll be quite all right before the old man gets home; don't you worry yourself, gel!" "Hold her head under the tap a minute, Tilly; let it run on the back of her neck." "She's only give way for once 'cause you've gone off and left her, Tilly; don't be hard on the poor thing for having no appetite and feeling empty." "What's she been having? Four-ale? Then give her a drop o' black beer, my gel; that 'll fetch her round sooner than anything —one drowns the other."

Gideon subsided into a corner, and Bob Kingdom lowered his eyes tactfully, as the kitchen door swung in, and Tilly, plumping her burden into the nearest chair, stood to get breath.

"Get done with it sharp," she whispered to Bob Kingdom, almost appealingly. "You can see what it is; we don't want her down that hole with a broken leg, and that's what it 'll be." She turned. "Nice day out for me, mother—once a month—ain't it? Nice place to come home to for a few hours. I'm so welcome, and made to feel it so. Helps me so to go back and work to send home a little something."

Mrs. Westaway gazed up hollowly at her, and thought it best to break into an unnerving paroxysm of weeping while she could.

"I love every hair of your head, Tilly," she sobbed, wildly.

"You show it, don't you?" said Tilly, stooping close. "You do, I must say. Look here, now, if it wasn't for father, and what he'd feel, this 'ud be very nearly your last time out! I'm just about tired o' worrying over what needn't be. I did try my hardest to pull things

together a bit before I left home, and got your sacred promise; and now look at you!"

"Tilly! We're one together, and always were," moaned her mother. "Don't keep on at me. Heaven above knows I can't bear much more to-day."

"Heaven above does," said Tilly. "I'd shake you, if I thought you could. Where've you been?—What do you mean by it? Come!"

"What's *he* doing here?—you don't ask that," wailed Mrs. Westaway. Unable to lift her heavy head properly, but seizing upon any palliative point within her range, she pointed a shaky finger at Bob Kingdom, as though he was at the bottom of it all. "Nice to have your place broken into, by a great fellow like that, while you're out, isn't it? How would you like it?"

"Don't be silly," said Tilly, coldly. Bob Kingdom had looked up with an astounded, open-mouthed stare. "You went off, and you didn't trouble what happened, and you're going from bad to worse, through not having a scrap of will of your own. I'd be ashamed. You're as thin as a herring now—and that boy's ribs are very nearly through his shirt—if you call it a shirt; I don't! Mother, you pull up! It's downright selfish want o' thought—that's what it is. If I've got to stay at home always and see after things like a prison jailer, and put a padlock on everything that can be pawned, we may as well all walk up to the workhouse, and done with it. Why, I see there's hardly a scrap o' food in the place; and when I went away——"

"Isn't there?" gasped Mrs. Westaway, checking her tears for an instant as in amazement. "Who's ate it?"

"——and yet you can go out 'Mondaying' and spend money like——"

"Tilly! I didn't," burst out Mrs. Westaway, heart-broken at this stab. "They paid for nearly every drop. I only had the two stamps you sent—and one o' them

the barman wouldn't take, 'cause I dropped it in something. You're trying to kill me, between you. Your father hasn't brought home a shilling—hasn't done a stroke—for three weeks; only I wouldn't let you know, to upset you. Oh—oh—I do feel bad inside me; it's your doing—springing on me like that—your doing!"

Tilly thought hard for a moment, and then, as Mrs. Westaway's head gave a deep plunge forward and a recoil, grabbed her by both arms.

"Come on!" was all she allowed herself to say. The scullery door slammed behind them. What happened was problematical; but the scullery was full of a gasping, strangling sound for a few minutes; and then, held up by Tilly, Mrs. Westaway groped out, looking several degrees more deathly. She reached her seat, and sank into it, by the help of Bog Kingdom's outstretched great arm. And there she sat, with little bubbles forming and breaking on her lips.

"Lovely, ain't it?" said Tilly, wiping her own forehead in turn. "Very sorry, Mr. Kingdom, but can't be helped. Where's Giddy?"

Bob Kingdom, speaking from the corner of his mouth, jerked his head casually doorwards.

"Coffee-shop—pint of hot tea. Only twopence, and penny on the can—that's nothing. Pull her round."

"Well, your heart's as big as your body—that's all I can say," said Tilly, unnecessarily moved—perhaps because she was feeling very "low" in general just then.

The tea arrived—or a portion of it, at any rate. Unresistingly, unquestioningly, Mrs. Westaway began to sip at it, just as she would with any other liquor; and a decided tinge of human color stole back into her cheeks.

"No more," she gasped, after a while.

"Finish it up," murmured Bob Kingdom to no one in particular.

"It's yours," said Tilly, holding the can toward him.

"You have it," he said. "Keep the can; handy, at a pinch." And Tilly, feeling unnecessarily grateful again, obeyed.

"Better?" she asked her mother, less sharply.

"I'm—all—right; there was nothing whatever wrong with me, my girl," said Mrs. Westaway, shaking her head to prove it. "It 'ud upset any one, seeing you so sudden—and finding him there like that. It's all your own fault entirely; I don't like these little bits of underhand. If you'd only dropped half a line to say you were coming to-day——"

"Ah, well, I couldn't—and wouldn't, if I could," Tilly informed her. "And I'm not so sorry I didn't. I'd sooner know how things are, and what to expect. All very well for me to dance home on a Sunday afternoon, and find father with a clean collar on, and winkles and a cloth on the table, and you wearing grandmother's gold brooch, and all the rest of it. That only hides things up. I tell you, I've got a lot to say to you before I'm done; mind I don't say it all to-night!"

"You have changed, Tilly," faltered her mother, with another fit of weeping in reserve. "You're not the same girl. I only hope you're not getting above us all. Look at your hands—they used to be all cuts and stained; now they're just as if you're afraid of honest work for your living."

"Strange, isn't it?" said Tilly. "If you want to know, I do a sight more work where I am than ever I did at home—and then have to do it all over again; only, you never troubled about my hands, and mistress does. For one thing, she says, master wouldn't have me come into the room, or carry his plate, with hands like that; and he's quite right. Ah, I tell you, I've changed a good many o' my ideas."

"I couldn't afford to think o' those things," explained her mother, weakly. "It costs money; you don't seem to

know what money is; you've forgotten; now you live on the fat o' the land."

"Well, it cost *her* half a ha'penny lemon and a penn'orth of oatmeal-soap," said Tilly; "and they lasted a fortnight; so she couldn't squeal very loud, could she?"

The word "squeal" seemed to strike a sinister note; Mrs. Westaway's reserve tears gushed.

"How does she treat you?" she sobbed. "If I thought she didn't treat you prop'ly, I'd have you away to-morrow, and bring down the law on her, I would. You're my daughter, whatever you are."

"If you only could hear yourself talking," was her daughter's response. "She's got her drawbacks, no doubt —same as you have; but she's a lady—a born lady in some ways; which isn't the same thing quite as a lady born. I dunno what she'd think if she stepped in here this minute; I've tried to shield you, if that's anything. Course, like most of 'em, from what I can see of it, she seems to think I'm a different sort o' human being from what she is—but she can't help that, I s'pose; it's her upbringing among people that used to keep slaves and horsewhip 'em, I expect. I believe she'd nurse me herself in her own bed if I was took ill; but while I'm up and about—well, I'm s'posed to keep doing something for my money the whole time; can only snatch a look out o' the window twice a day. She forgets, when I carry up their tea in bed, I've been up hours at work; and she forgets it again at night—unless she happens to feel tired herself. And that's what makes the weeks seem so terrible long—never belonging to yourself for a minute, it seems. . . . Try a walk round the room, and see how you feel now."

Mrs. Westaway essayed it—so uncertainly at the outset, however, that Bob Kingdom slid his boards into place and started nailing them down.

"Finish it off to-morrow," he said aloud to himself. "Won't take long."

He lumbered slowly upright, his head almost brushing the ceiling, and proceeded to try the scullery tap. He was heard to mutter that it wasn't a "real" tap, and that the house seemed groggy everywhere. He picked up his tools, fumbled a hand through his hair till he caught Tilly's eye and could give her a furtive friendly nod, and then went out.

"Big bullock," Gideon thought to whisper, echoing some one else's remark, almost before the door closed; and for the moment it looked as if Tilly would have raised her hand to him.

"You're a despicable little thing," she said, with a break of her voice; "it's a good thing for you I know you can't help it. Now, mother, you seem tottery—you go and lie down for an hour, while I tidy up and get the tea properly. It's past three o'clock."

Mrs. Westaway paused with a hand to her forehead, which had begun to ache. "I don't somehow fancy there's any tea left——"

"Oh, yes, there is; I happened to think of that." She opened her small handbag again, and produced a packet. "There you are! It isn't stealing," she said. "The mistress allows me two spoonfuls for my tea, and I've made do with one every other day just lately. I'll see to it. There, go on!—and do make up your mind to go a bit straight, and not keep me laying awake at nights wondering what's going to become of you and father."

"I get so miserable," whimpered Mrs. Westaway, holding on to the door. "There's no change from day to day, or a penny to call my own. If I can't have a glass, what is there? Life don't seem worth living out."

"I know all that," said Tilly, stoutly impressive. "But what's the use? It's the only life you'll get here; it was parceled out for you, and you've got to go through it.

and not think so much about yourself while there's others. Bless me! A cab-horse might as well go and drop down because he ain't pulling the Lord Mayor's coach. You don't suppose, just because I'm out in a 'place,' my life's all fairies and giblet-pie, do you? I can assure you it isn't. If I wanted to be wicked, I should want to know why I can't change places with the mistress, and why father's kicked from job to job like a convict while master sits there smoking fourpenny cigars. But I don't; I do my best, because I should be a fool to do my worst, shouldn't I? Well, then, be sensible, mother, do! Have a sleep, and do your hair, and put your other dress on, and let father come in for once and think it's worth while *him* bucking up a bit. Shall I come and tuck you up?"

Mrs. Westaway, undoubtedly very distressed both in mind and body as she dragged herself into their only other apartment—the bedroom, three yards up the passage on the right—was understood to mumble that she neither required nor deserved any tucking-up, and only wanted to close her eyes and forget herself for two minutes.

"That 'll be two solid hours," Tilly reflected. "Ah, well, it can't be helped. Now, then, Giddy, if you behave yourself from now till I go, I've got a penny book for you. I shan't say where it is, or what it's about; but I've got it. Put your tongue in, and try and look as if you know what you're up to. And, mind, I shall hear from Mr. Bob Kingdom just how you carry on to-morrow, and whether you make a little beast of yourself by saying things about him."

"He's your sweetheart," said Gideon, jumping promptly to the natural conclusion.

"Oh, no, he's not," said Tilly, loftily and yet sadly. "He doesn't have time to go in for any o' that rubbish—any more than I do. Now, then!"

She rummaged in her mysterious small bag again, and

whipped out a tiny packet. Gideon certainly sat very still—until she flicked it into what looked like an endless golden serpent.

"What the devil's that thing?" he whispered, half disappointed.

"Stop it," said Tilly. "I won't have you use such talk while I'm here; you're only a child; bad enough when you grow up—if ever you do." She looked round at the walls dubiously. "I wouldn't have brought it if I'd known father was not in work. Still, it 'll surprise him—look something out o' the common for once."

"Mother 'll sell it, when you're gone," suggested Giddon, intuitively, if not maliciously.

"Will she? I don't think," was Tilly's calm reply. "That's got to last out till Chris'mas. Penny a yard anywhere—and a penny-three for a dozen yards at the sale. I couldn't let it pass; I picked it out o' the basket quick, in case it was a mistake; two dozen yards—threepence-ha'penny."

She had intended to hang it in loops and festoons from wall to wall, and astound her parents with the ethereal effect—almost a Highbury effect, in fact. The idea was a failure at the outset. There were no hooks or nails in the walls—nothing to attach it to; she had overlooked that. Presently, with a sigh of resignation, she rolled it up and replaced it in the bag.

"Everything I try seems to go wrong," she said. "Don't say anything about it, Giddy, and I'll bring a penny hammer and tacks when I come again. Of course life ain't worth living, if people don't even try to make the most o' their rooms and everything! I'm sure, I should be ashamed o' this place, if I had to come home to it again. It's got to look like a den. Mother might just as well wear out as rust out. You ought just to see the bedroom I've got now, all to myself, Giddy."

"I don't want to see it," said Gideon. "You can't eat it."

The two hours passed; a third passed, and brought dusk. Then Mrs. Westaway, normal save for swollen eyes, reappeared. She couldn't understand what gave her such a splitting headache, she said, nor why she should have so much more trouble than other people. She was positive something must be going wrong in her inside lately, by her sensations.

"Well, there you are!" said Tilly. "I can't make you a new one, if you will play about with it so. Here's the tea all ready; I heard you drop off the bed."

She poured out one cupful, and set it carefully aside —for her father. And, coincidently, just at that moment he came in, and let his tool-bag slide down with a bang—a quiet, nondescript man with a glaze of weariness or despair over his keen eyes, and his clothes smelling of wet mortar and burning bricks.

"Hullo, Tilly; you here?" was all he said, in a faint, straining voice, and with no appearance of surprise. At his wife he had not even glanced.

"Yes, I'm here—we're all here; it's like old times," said Tilly, with resolute cheerfulness. She pulled him into his chair, and bustled about generally. A kiss would have staggered them all, so she had refrained. "I didn't know father's chest was as bad as that, mother," she took the first opportunity to remark. "Why ever didn't you let me know?"

"I didn't know it myself," explained Mrs. Westaway. "How should I know it, if he never speaks—'cept to grumble? You've forgotten what things are."

"Well, it's a strange thing I should notice it at once," answered Tilly, with spirit. "You want a little turpentine and camphor, and rub it well in, night and morning. Gracious me, it's no trouble to do that!" And her mother sighed deeply.

"We haven't got such a thing in the place. Besides, your father wouldn't let anybody rub him—not me, at any rate—'tisn't likely. You've forgot everything."

"I s'pose I have," Tilly was forced to admit. "It does seem a bit strange and dreamy, like, getting off the 'bus here, and seeing all the old shops again, and walking up the same pavements where we used to play hop-scotch, and looking in the same old shop windows. You wouldn't believe how"—she substituted "different" for "dirty" quickly—"how different they look to me now. How mistress must feel, when she goes to the seaside for a month, and comes back and opens all the doors and windows—well, there! Come, brighten up, some of you," she thought it time to urge. All three sat gazing at her as at some species of being which had undergone an odd metamorphosis and might presently undergo another in full view of the spectators. "I shall have to be starting away very shortly. Haven't we got anything at all to say?"

"D'you get enough to eat, my gel?" her father was stirred to ask, in his weak-chested voice.

And she beamed on him—secretly most proud of the fact that she "took after" him in color and temperament, while the boys favored their dark mother.

"Do I? Well, don't I look it? You should see the tucks I've let out in my things, these last few weeks. All plain stuff, mind you; of course, I don't get anything like what they have upstairs; but it's good, all the same, if you've got the appetite. No fried fish, or pickles, or fat-cakes, or black-puddings, or anything of that; mistress won't have them in the place—says that poor people waste their money and digestions on stuff of that kind."

"She's a bit of a skinflint all round, then?" queried Mrs. Westaway, who, although taking very little real interest in solid food, believed herself to be quite the equal of

any Highbury housewife in its choice and preparation.

"Skinflint?" Tilly bridled. "I've never said so; I'm not going to run her down behind her back. But I'll tell you one thing she *is*, if you'd like to know: she's more saving and artful and careful, in some ways, than ever you've been in your life. And that's saying something."

"It is," agreed her mother, sighingly. "I can't see how and never shall."

"Well, I'll tell you. For one thing, you'd be amazed how particular she is about her shopping. No rough and ready; no running out last thing at night for anything to be got—but everything what you might call apple-pie order and done to a 'turn.' Course, it all comes to the door in them little dash-about carts; but she don't take it in on that account. She goes through every parcel at the front door herself, and if the bacon's too fat, or the greens look a week old, or anything o' that, back she sends it. Why, you'd think her a fair detective in her shopping, you would."

"I should; I do," said Mrs. Westaway, distantly. "I'm not that sort, thank goodness. If I go into a shop, and they've got what I want, and it suits me, and it isn't too dear, and I know I can't get it much cheaper by walking the soles off my boots, I don't stand beating about the bush for an hour. I take it, and come out, and done with it."

"Yes," said Tilly, more softly; "because you get it on 'tick,' you mean, and have to take what the man likes, and pay what he asks. Still, we don't want any wry words, do we? Well, here's another thing. *You*, every time you clear out the grate, throw all the ashes and muck spank into the dustbin, don't you? *She* don't; oh, no! You might have knocked me down, the first day or two. She puts it all in a box on rockers—at least, I have to—shakes it, and sifts out every scrap of

cinder and what-not. Then they're wetted and carried up, and banked on the sitting-room fire; and they burn for hours like a young furnace. What d'you think o' that? She asked me if you did it, and I said: 'No, mum, she's never give it a thought.' 'Ah,' she says, 'it ought not to require any thought. People like that lose ten shillings in every sovereign they spend. They buy cheap coal, that's half cinder and slag,' she says, 'and then they throw all their cinders away.' And she was fair horrified when I let out that you bought butter a penny for an ounce. She gets the best for one-and-a-penny a pound in the summer—sometimes a shilling, when there's no company expected."

"I wish she'd mind her own bis'ness," said Mrs. Westaway, stirring uneasily on her chair. "I won't have her making you stuck-up; so there!"

"Well, it's true enough, mother, if you look at it," persisted Tilly. "She's not mean—it's not that. I'm sure it's wonderful, the pennies and tuppences she gives away at the door alone. If a poor thing comes along with a baby, or a man with an organ looks as if he's a ghost gone to sleep while he turns the handle, she doesn't wait for 'em to knock. You'll find her at the window, watching. 'That looks genuine to me,' she says. 'I believe that baby's her own,' or 'I don't think that man's got a pipe alight up his sleeve,' or something o' that. And out she sends me, with a copper or two and a sponge-cake for the baby. And they say: 'Gawd bless your little heart, miss!'—to *me,* mind you!" Tilly wiped her eyes quickly. "And she will have it that gas is cheaper than all your lamp-oil, because you can turn it up or down as you want it, and don't keep breaking glasses; and I know she's never one to wear a pair of stockings till they drop off her, and then throw 'em away; she has a regular darning afternoon once a fortnight, and a sewing-woman comes in to do it. I thought to myself

at first—well, if you're always saving this and watching that, you might as well be dead and buried on the spot; but I don't think it now." She smoothed the front of her skirt down in quite a dignified, matronly way. "Yes; I happen to know she does a bit o' good with her money secretly, too, as they say. We're only three doors away from the Guild of the Brave Poor Things."

"The what?" gasped Mrs. Westaway. And Tilly, having felt so glowingly superior for a moment, nearly blushed.

"Don't you know what that is?" she faltered. "Well, I don't myself, quite; although I believe they're very wonderful, from all I hear. Seems they're cripples, or bankrupts, or something o' that; and they're all there to cheer one another up; and they make things for poor people. Good idea, isn't it?"

Mrs. Westaway, with her full wits about her now, looked most dubious.

"You be careful," she advised. "The name's enough for me; I never like the look o' them queer religious bodies; mind they ain't Mormons, with a lake o' salt water under the house, as your grandmother used to talk about. You never know the tricks they get up to. Why, what was it Mrs. Grumbley was telling me yesterday?—about a man that knocked at a house like yours when the mistress was out, and asked the maid to smell his scent—a penny a bottle; and down she went on the mat, in a dead faint, while he roamed over the house and took every mortal thing he could lay his hands on. You be careful! I s'pose," she thought it maternal to inquire, with an odd association of ideas, "you haven't come across any respectable young chap yet—of the marrying sort, I mean?"

"Oh, yes, several—one or two, at any rate," said Tilly, steadily, if sadly. "But they don't come across me. You needn't worry about that; I can't see myself ever

getting married and a home to call my own. I don't think about it now."

"Well, you ought to," counseled her mother. "That's what you're alive for, anyway; and you *might* get hold o' one worth marrying. I'm sure, I dunno where all these new-fangled notions come from. In my young days, every girl had a chap at seventeen—and sometimes half a dozen to pick from. Not that I want to hear you're gadding about with all and sundry——"

"You needn't worry," softly repeated Tilly, twisting her handkerchief and stealing a wistful look at her father to see what he thought about it. "Things are very different nowadays in that line. Mistress was only saying so. She spoke to me about that very thing when I got there: whether I had any young man—a follower, she called it. I said, no; no one ever wanted to follow me, that I knew of. And she said it seemed strange how things had changed round—just the same as you do; and that servants all used to have followers, but they all seemed to have disappeared nowadays. Ah, well, it's all of a piece with everything else, I s'pose. They say there's hardly any coal left in the ground now, and that the sun can't hold out much longer, and that the earth 'll go off with a bang one o' these days. I shouldn't wonder. Still, she's not at all a bad sort, when you come to know her—my mistress. I never asked her for the day 'off' to-day—last thing I should have dreamed of. But an old servant of hers dropped in to see her, and looked like taking her things off and staying a bit; so down she came and stunned me by saying I could go. And that's how I'm here."

A little longer, and Tilly rose; her "day" was ended. She dressed quickly, and did not linger.

"Nine-thirty's my time," she said, "and nine-thirty she'll expect me to keep to."

There were just three little things left to do. She

fumbled somewhere in her bodice and produced the penny story-book, which Gideon, his tongue slyly curling out, carried off without a word. Then she went behind her father, pressed a battered little half-ounce of tobacco into his hand, and kissed the back of his drooped head with a bump. Lastly she beckoned her mother to the passage, and whispered hurriedly:

"I haven't said anything—I couldn't. But don't let Jimmy think, because he's out of sight, he's forgotten and done with, and that none of us have got a minute or a penny to spare—don't!"

CHAPTER III

NEXT minute, with a slightly swaying movement of her trim, tubby little figure, Tilly was going down the pavement, thinking of so many things at once that her mind was really almost a blank, and her step mechanical.

"Evening, Mr. Kingdom!" she said, quite unthinkingly, as she turned into the wide main road and passed a dim shop doorway from which the vast frontal bulk of Mr. Kingdom, senior, projected in a curve.

Mr. Kingdom, who was mentally chewing the cud at the moment, favored her with a bulging glare of his small, fishy, "parboiled" eyes, but seemed too astounded by the familiarity to answer her in time. No one ever accused Mr. Kingdom, senior, of resembling his son in anything except size; and he had no intention of allowing the contrast to fade out.

"Whatever he is, he don't get it from *me,*" he often observed, with convincing emphasis. "I've never had no schoolin' to speak of, like he has; but I ain't a walkin' lump o' putty. I've cut my own way in the world; I didn't wait for it to walk up. When you're lookin' at him, you ain't lookin' at me, please."

Only a few yards further on—just before that comparatively dark, obscure patch of the main road merged into a blaze of shop-light—Tilly drew up dead. The fingers clutching bag and umbrella seemed suddenly numbed; for an instant all the noise of traffic receded from her, and the tall lamps burned as in a mist.

"Hullo," she answered, with a shiver in her voice, to the one that had called her quickly, carefully, by name. "What—whatever are you doing down here?"

"How's Tilly? Something like a bit of luck, that!" Bert Lovell replied, lightly. "Beats everything, that does. How goes it, old girl?"

Tilly, perhaps unknowingly, had backed a step or so as he sauntered forward. It was not because he had been standing in the shadow of that particular corner, smoking a cigarette, just as she happened to pass it; it was not because of a furtive keenness in his glittering dark eyes —a quick glance to right and left—as of a fertile, restless brain at work; it was something more than that. She looked him up and down—and then in the eyes again—her hand put out to hold his own away.

"What's it mean?" she asked, with dry lips. "Why'd you frighten me like that? I—I know very well your ship's out at China. I—I read it in the paper."

"That's so; every one knows that," he said, taking the cigarette from his mouth and looking down at it. "But I'm not there; I got my 'leave'; I'm here, in good old Stepney."

Tilly's arm fell away from him.

"No, I don't believe it," she told herself, slowly. "I know what you are—I know what you were. What have you been and done?"

"Oh, well, let's drop that!" Bert's bantering smile flitted out of sight for the moment; he looked reckless and impatient, as he threw away the cigarette-stump and pocketed his hands. "If you must know, I turned the whole rotten game up—came out of it; didn't suit me—I wasn't made to be bowled about like a ninepin. I'm on 'leave' right enough, as I said—only it's what they call 'French.' See?"

Tilly, gazing in vague horror, put up her hand as if to draw away somethng that obscured her vision. She

looked about her, as if wondering: "*Am* I on my feet? *Is* it Stepney High Street?"

"I seemed to know it; I felt it," she said, "the moment I heard you speak. You've deserted."

And he laughed, and hitched up his belt unconsciously.

"I knew you'd have it out to the very word," he said. "That's you all over. Thought you'd be glad enough to see me again, anyhow or anywhere."

"Did you?" Tilly looked away, set her lips, and seemed to make her effort then and there. "Then you made a great mistake. Whatever I might feel, I should know better than to show it—that's all done with." She turned upon him, with a touch of fierce resentment. "Aren't you *afraid* to be seen standing talking in the open street like this? D'you think I want to get you into trouble? If you've done that—what you say—what d'you want to come back here for, where you're known by everybody?"

"Don't shout it," Bert said—although her voice was far from a shout. "And don't look at me like that, as if I was after your purse. Haven't even asked for a kiss, have I? Come down here!"

"No—no!" Tilly resisted the suggestion with deep decision. "No, Bert; there's no reason why I should—not now. You played your game with me long ago; you're not going to pick me up again so easily as all that. I'm only sorry for you—that's all; sorry you've made such a mess of your life as you have," she ended, with an involuntary choke.

"Don't be silly," Bert argued, in a "taking," disarming way that, together with his impudent dark eyes and his cool irresponsibility, was his chief asset in life. "If I've played any game with you, I never meant to; and so that amounts to nothing. I didn't know my own mind, p'raps; but that's nothing new in a man, is it? P'raps I do, now; I could do with a matey, any way. Look

here, now!" He got a hand on her shoulder somehow, and managed to keep it there, giving the shoulder a coaxing squeeze at intervals. "I'll just ask you something. Do you remember the night I went off—just eighteen months ago, wasn't it?"

"Do I?" Tilly repeated to herself, her eyes misty and averted. She was not going to look at him full again on any account, she told herself—no, not on any account; not merely because she had already jeopardized her nine-thirty stipulation, but because he was not worth it. "You took good care that I should never forget it, didn't you? I was fool enough to go and wait at the station, and you passed me without a word. Without a word!"

"Well, I was half drunk at the time, wasn't I?" he urged, still smiling.

"Yes, I s'pose so," she replied. "Purposely, p'raps, to let me think you were about as bad as you could be. Oh yes, I can look back and see it all now."

"Ah, but wait a minute, old girl. What had you told me only two or three weeks beforehand? That you'd never have anything to do with a sailor."

"No, I didn't," was Tilly's quiet reply. "I said I'd never marry one. Not because I wouldn't—but because I couldn't. But that's nothing to do with——"

"Lot to do with it," he declared. "It put my back up, for one thing—me being keen on going off for one just then. I s'pose a sailor's the same as any other——"

Tilly tried to draw away.

"I don't want to talk about that," she said. "There's no need. If any woman feels she can marry one—well, she does it with her eyes open; and she *knows;* and it shows she's able to bear what she knows. That's all I meant at the time—I didn't somehow think you could leave me and go off like that. But it made no difference to your feelings in the least—because you hadn't any.

You only looked me up when you thought you would; I know it now."

"Ah, but you were a little bit fond of me," he persisted, caressingly. "No lies; you were. And p'raps you don't know all I was thinking of when I took my first chance to grease out o' the Navy, do you?"

"'Sh!" breathed Tilly, so fearfully that he had to smother a laugh. "When was it? How long have you been back here? What did you do it for?"

"If you keep still a minute, I'll tell you; you, and no one else." He drew out a fresh cigarette, and lit it. Much as she longed to be able to tear herself away, it seemed somehow beyond her. She was positive that she despised him, and yet her heart was beating so violently that it seemed probable he had noticed its movement. Against her will, she watched the smoke curl from his lips and nostrils. "You're out in a 'place' now, aren't you?" he asked, carelessly. "I heard all about it; I've been dodging about here for over a week—couldn't keep away from the old show. But I'm not on view to every one, mind you—I'm not taking any silly risks. I could show my face in Highbury safe enough; that's where you are, ain't you? Just the right, quiet sort o' place——"

"You keep away," Tilly whispered, going very pale. "Don't think about anything of that. Believe me or not, if I find you up that way, I'll take myself off, and you won't know where."

"Believe you would, too! Oh, well," he said obligingly, "we'll let that stand over for the time being. You always were a rum card, and I s'pose you always will be. You expect too much of a fellow—that's the long and the short of it. And if you go on expecting—well, you're likely to go on, aren't you? Because fellows are all much the same underneath, whatever they look on top. I did think of you, and I do still; but if you say

it's all right 'off'—for ever, amen, good-bye—well, you don't think I'm going to force myself and stand in your way, do you?"

He waited, smoking coolly—watching sideways her small, steadfast profile. He had a trick of passing a hand upward over his face every now and then, as if to mask a change of smile; but Tilly had grown used to that long ago. It was her secret weakness that she had to admire "dark" men; and Bert was undeniably dark, with glossy black hair, and a rich little mustache that set off his creamy complexion. On the surface there seemed no reason why, being human and faulty herself, she should not ignore the past with one heroic sweep, and "try" him again; but Tilly could not smother her inward misgivings. To long to trust him was one thing —to be able to do so, was another.

"Tell you what I did," he resumed, easily. "I absolutely couldn't stick it any longer—not on that boat, at any rate. I should have picked up a knife to the 'old man'—that's the captain—as sure as sure before long. He treated us like a pack o' dogs—it's worse than a dog's life, if you get on a boat o' that sort. If I'd had to do my full three years up the Mediterranean on her, I should have jumped overboard. Well, that's what I did do, as a matter o' fact."

"You didn't!" Tilly whispered, made to watch his lips in a sort of spell. To think of reading Bert Lovell's inmost soul for herself, as women did in books, had never yet been practicable, his attitude being so elusive and slippery, in a sense. When not pushing back his cap or tilting his head for a silent laugh, Bert was either shrugging, twisting his neck, or making play with a cigarette. He baffled the most imploring scrutiny.

"I did; but keep it to yourself, now we've touched hands again, as they say on board. It just so happened that we were ordered back to Portsmouth for repairs,

or some bunkum or other. 'That's done it,' I says to myself. The 'old man' raved and roared and cursed, bullied the officers, stopped 'shore leave' all round, and dealt out punishment just out o' spite. Some of the 'boys' from here had come down to give me a good time, and I made up my mind I was going ashore to have it—because lots o' chaps 'break ship' just to get clapped in jail and dismissed the Service. A lot o' ladders had been left hanging over the side; so half-way through my night-watch I says to myself, 'Here goes! So long, Mister Navy!' I just clambered down, dropped, and shoved along with the tide till I'd got clear o' the docks and off Southsea beach. I found the 'boys,' burnt my Navy togs, and was in London here at ten o'clock next morning. And I'm not going back, not if they draw and quarter me. What d'you think o' that?"

"But you're bound to be found out," gasped Tilly. "Bound to be!"

"Not in a lifetime," Bert told her, sweepingly. "Think I don't know what I'm doing? Any amount o' men who can't 'buy out' take their chance to desert, only people don't hear of it. The Navy may be all right enough, but it's hell on earth if you get the wrong sort o' men over you; you might just as well be at Portland, and done with it. So that's how it stands, and here we are again; and it's for you to make the next move, old girl."

"But what are you doing?—where are you living?" she persisted, grasping for the first time that he was almost stylishly dressed, and outwardly evinced no particular anxiety as to the future.

"Oh, I've got a quiet little room not so far off," he said. "Nothing to be downhearted about. Like to pop in and see it? Have a bit o' supper, and put your arms all round my neck, and admit you're glad to see me home again. What say?"

Tilly did not seem to hear this. She was studying his

expression in her own doubting, sorrowful way as for the last time. Twice she turned before she could bring herself to apply the simple test.

"And what is it you mean? That you—that you're going to make a fresh start, and settle down to save your money?"

Bert studied the point, smoothing the back of his head as an aid to reflection.

"Well, I don't know about 'save money,'" he admitted. "What good's that? I'd sooner spend it, while my chance holds; we should want to get about a bit together, shouldn't we? Course, I suppose I should fall into a job of some sort, but just for the minute I'm greedy for——"

"I don't mean that," Tilly put in quickly. She actually grasped his arm, as if for an instant she had some wild idea of discovering whether she possessed any power whatever to help him—to mould him. "I mean, what's the idea of you coming after me again like this, after the cruel way you've played with me in the past? Is it just to pass time?—or have you—have you got some idea of steadying down and thinking of marrying? Oh, Bert, look at me fair!—say what you really mean!"

"There you go!" Bert drew in a deep breath, and looked away instead. "Can't we walk out together without nailing ourselves down? Can't we be independent? Marrying! Upon my word, that's all you seem to think of."

"Do I? Do I?" Tilly choked, brokenly. "I've never mentioned the word to you before; I wouldn't. That's enough—that's quite enough. You can get plenty of girls to take you on trust; leave me alone!"

Her head drooped, and she walked on, the sounds of traffic muffled again, the lights burning as in a damp haze.

It had not occurred to her that he would take the trouble to walk after her; it seemed so certain that she had

scotched every vestige of hope in him—as in herself. Reaching Bishopsgate at length, and pausing for the bus that would carry her as far as the "Angel" at Islington, she looked round with a little recurring shiver, as he sauntered to her shoulder again.

"What's up now?" he queried.

The small purse that she had drawn from her bag, was open in her hand, and she had been gazing incredulously, hopelessly into its depths.

"I've—I've left my fare-money behind," she said, as if it were a tragedy. Indeed, he saw her throat work, at the thought of being half an hour behind time already.

"That's all right," he said smoothly. "Was to be! I've got plenty"—diving a hand into his trousers' pocket.

"No—no!" Tilly stared, grasped the fact of wealth, and then backed away from him in a manner not to be mistaken for relief.

"I've got some, I mean," he corrected, hastily. His hand loosed half the coins he had grasped on the first impulse; nevertheless, she noticed a surprising amount of silver glinting among the copper. "Here you are. Pay up when you like—not at all, if you don't want to."

"No—no!" Tilly repeated, in the same resolute gasp.

"Oh, all right! Makes no odds. Consider yourself booked, old girl. Sooner or later!—I shall hang on to you now."

Hardly knowing what she did, Tilly struck at the outstretched hand, and turned and scurried on, as if all she wanted now was, to get away from him. Once or twice, pushing her way feverishly along the crowded pavements, she gave a scared glance behind—and went on faster than ever.

She reached the house at Highbury just an hour behind her time, and surprised her mistress by offering not a syllable of explanation. But, for some reason or other, the mistress preserved a similar silence.

CHAPTER IV

"WE'RE nearly there," said Tilly Westaway, in the hushed tones that appeared quite essential in these circumstances. "If I was you, dear, I'd stand still a minute, and steady your feelings—in case it's not to come to anything this time, I mean."

She had caught the term of endearment from her companion, and used it as often as she could. At first, a year ago, it had sounded a little out of place on her lips, because it was applied to a lady; but now it had come to seem perfectly natural.

"No, dear, we'll keep straight on," Alice Richards answered, pressing the arm that hugged hers so tightly—almost happily. "I'm not letting myself hope too much—I've learned not to. I shall know by one look at his face whether I can speak or not. Hold the umbrella a little more over yourself, Tilly."

A month had gone, and Tilly's periodical "day out" had come round again. She had spent the greater part of it in shopping, in packing her purchases into small compass, and in making the varied assortment of pennyworths look as numerous and enticing as possible. Jimmy Westaway—always providing that he was in the mood to appreciate it—had quite a little surprise packet on the way.

"Fancy it starting to rain just as I met you at the station," said Tilly, delighted to think that it was she, and not Alice Richards, who had thought of an umbrella. "I see you've brought his outdoor clothes," she added, glancing at the parcel Alice carried in a strap. She gave another

comforting tug at the arm she held. "Don't you worry, dear; somehow I feel sure you're to go away laughing instead of crying, this time."

This was merely a figure of speech, because she had never yet seen Alice Richards cry, and had rather wondered at first—until she came to divine that there are women who can weep for others, but not for themselves. Alice, dressed in her tasteful black, looked a little more fragile than on the last occasion, and her face, when she forgot herself for a moment, looked to be growing more than ever like a little oval slab of white marble; but in an instant the patient, sweet and loving smile quivered back to her lips and lit up her heavy dark eyes. What Tilly thought of Alice Richards—how literally she felt herself to be keeping step with an angel garbed as a woman—would never be known by any one in this world.

"And here we are," said Tilly, as carelessly as possible. Her own heart had given rather a sick little flutter at sight again of the familiar blotchy gray walls looming up out of the haze of twilight. "I'm so glad I thought to drop you a line. It's so much nicer having some one to speak to, isn't it? There's a good many here."

They had paused at a gateway built beneath an arch of masonry. Access to inmates of the "Overflow," although considerably less limited than at the great county asylums proper, was confined to certain hours upon certain days; and a thick knot of people, mostly women, and mostly clutching small parcels, stood silently waiting. Tilly exchanged little nods of recognition with several; Alice Richards, gazing out ahead, did not seem to see any one.

Some clock struck five notes.

"We mustn't forget," whispered Tilly. "Hours are from three till five after this month until next April. Once I made the mistake, and found the gate just shutting in my face. I threw my parcel right over the wall, and

called out, 'For Jimmy Westaway—oh, *please!*', before I knew what I was doing. I don't suppose he ever got it. And there were three new-laid eggs in it, too. Here they come!"

A key clanked leisurely, and the gate swung back. That evening's visitors, like a black cluster of bees, passed over a damply shining paved courtyard, and formed up silently again at a door beyond. This note of silence, within and without, seemed to be a feature of the place.

The door opened, and they filed into a room, with seats in a series of niches on either side—a room so long and narrow that it was practically a corridor, extending out from the main building like a finger. At the farther end was another door, watched with varying shades of expectancy by all eyes save those of the attendants who strolled up and down.

"Who do you want?" was asked formally of each caller in order; and the word was passed down to the farther door. Special permits and railway-passes were being signed in one corner; in another visitors were required to stack their umbrellas or walking-sticks. There was no confusion, but necessarily some amount of delay before Alice and Tilly, who had sunk down in the last niche, were reached.

"Victor Richards," said Alice, in a steady whisper.

"And James Westaway," Tilly recollected, just in time.

They waited again—and this was the trying moment when Tilly did not care to look at Alice, but sat very still on the edge of her chair, with her hands folded shakily on her lap, like one awaiting something solemn in a church. Just a little buzz of sound had risen about her; for some one the tension was relieved, as two or three of the 'wanted' inmates appeared at the farther door.

The first, as it chanced, was a young man who held himself very erect and distant, and who walked stiffly down the room and seemed about to wheel and retire

again. "Joe!" breathed some one—presumably his timid mother. "Joe, boy!" And Joe, after a somewhat supercilious glance at her clothes—his own being a miscellaneous lot of oddments—deigned to sit down a yard away, hitched up his shabby trousers very precisely, and clasped his hands around one knee. The mother began to cry softly into her handkerchief; and Joe, with another disdainful glance round, turned his back upon her. Other people looked away.

Quite a different sort of man—stout, gray-bearded, twinkle-eyed, and beaming on everybody—had followed him briskly in. A wave of joviality came in with him. There seemed nothing amiss whatever with this party—save in the fact that his joviality was real. He kissed his daughter heartily, kissed her again, and laughed right out at her anxiety and confusion.

"When are you coming out and home, father?" she had asked at once.

"Me? Bless the girl," he said, "they won't let me go out of here. I'm too useful to 'em; I'm a worker. They've put me on making the beds and peeling the potatoes. I'm the only one that peels 'em thin and takes the eyes out; they won't let *me* go—not likely. Still, I'm going out for a stroll with the attendant one o' these fine days, I hope; I want to see what the trams and buses look like again. Bless you, I do what I like here."

Tilly was watching breathlessly another young man, better dressed in his own private clothes—and evidently a "paying case"—who had sauntered into a niche nearly opposite. His young wife—quite the lady, in Tilly's estimation—caressed him quietly, gave him a box of cigarettes, and began talking earnestly. He listened, stroking his mustache and nodding at intervals—just as if it were an ordinary after-supper conversation at home.

"Ah, by the bye," he broke out gravely, critically, of a

sudden; "now you're here, how old do you think I am, my dear? Just give a guess."

"Why, of course, I know how old you are, Frank," she replied, with a brave smile. "What do you mean?"

"Well," he said, with the utmost dignity and impressiveness, evidently about to make a revelation, "I don't think you do; I don't think any one does. I have been figuring it out. I find that I am just one-and-a-half. I was surprised—totally surprised. They take me to be much older here. Just one-and-a-half, my dear! I have it worked out on paper, so there can be no mistake. Got a pencil? We'll go through it all again."

The "Overflow" officials, at visiting times, exercised a supervision that could be felt without being noticeable. It might have been a public collection of little family parties—with only a jarring note of reminder now and then, when a patient "forgot himself" for a moment, and was checked by a touch on the shoulder. The attendants strolled to and fro, or stood with an air of aloofness, only watching askance to see that no parcel string was left unaccounted for, or that those inmates whose friends had brought tobacco were not allowed to pocket the matches. When necessary, the nearest attendant himself provided the necessary light for pipe or cigarette.

"Ours are a long time coming, aren't they?" Tilly whispered to Alice out of the corner of her mouth. "I wonder if they've told 'em we're here; sometimes it's overlooked. D'you feel quite well?"

"Quite," Alice whispered back. Their hands met in a pressure beneath the small table provided.

Alice Richards came here every fortnight without fail, but Tilly's visits had been comparatively few and far between. For Tilly the scene had a fascination, both concrete and in the abstract, that was superior to the thrill of any stage-play. With an eye for all details, she thought she would venture a useul word to a middle-aged man

in the next niche, who seemed to have nothing to say to his visitors after the first brief nod of recognition, but sat absorbed in a fit of gloom.

"And how are *you?*" she bent aside to ask him pointedly. "Looking a little better, I think. Last time I came, you were not feeling very grand, if you remember. Aren't you pleased to see your friends once again?"

"No," he said, promptly and stubbornly. "No, I'm not. If they won't take me out of this, and let me get back to my work, I've got nothing to say to them—don't want to have anything to do with them." And he gazed grimly away in proof.

"Oh, but," said Tilly, answering an appealing look from one of his two visitors, known to be his sisters, "if the doctor won't pass you out yet, what then? What can they do, poor things?"

"Make him," he said, with decision. "Have him locked up as a scoundrel and a traitor, if he won't. Get Parliament to brand him. I know just what it is: they're in league with him—they're really the enemy. They bring him bottles of wine as a bribe. What have they brought me? A few sweets and an ounce of shag—just to keep me quiet. I'm going to talk to you—not them." And he bounced his chair round. "Give me a kiss," he said. "I like you."

Tilly complied, without any noticeable hesitation. It was a little harmless peculiarity of his that had developed itself on a previous occasion, and that certainly was not worth resenting, he being quite fatherly in aspect and intention.

"There!" she said. "I think you ought to kiss your sisters now, after coming all this way to see you. I'm sure it's no fault of theirs. You fell off the Pickford's van, and hurt your poor head, if you recollect. That's why you're being looked after here—for a few months."

"So I did—so I did," he appeared to remember. "Still,

I'm not going to talk to them; I don't like their faces—I like yours. I say!" He touched her shoulder in mysterious confidence and drew her forward, to whisper. It must have been just at that instant that Victor Richards came down the long room; she heard the small sob in Alice's throat, that told her. "I've got a whole pile of money on me, and no one knows. I'm keeping it to myself—with a reason."

"Oh, that is nice," said Tilly, straining her eyes to catch some glimpse in the distance of her brother Jimmy. "However did you manage that? Why, yes, you're quite a millionaire."

Still holding her, he had drawn a handful of metal buttons from his pocket, and allowed her just a fugitive glimpse.

"I'm going to have the edges milled," he confided. "The others tear them off their trousers and throw them away, so that they have to be put back to bed till fresh trousers can be got. Chambers goes round and collects the lot. Haven't got one on *you* anywhere, have you?"

"Now, then, Chambers," said an attendant, tapping his shoulder, "don't get excited; keep quiet."

"It's all right," he explained, very frigidly. "This lady is an old friend of mine—exceedingly old. That man doesn't like me," he informed Tilly, as the attendant moved on. "There's treachery brewing, you mark my word."

"He looks a very nice man," suggested Tilly; "a very kind man, I should think."

"Oh, he is!" confirmed Mr. Chambers, whose trend of thought was easily veered. "Haven't I told you? Between ourselves, he's related to several Royal Families; if you watch, you'll see a mark behind his ear. It's a strawberry mark, that you only see on coronets. But I didn't tell you this bit!" he went on eagerly. His sisters sat disconsolate, as he edged his chair yet a little farther

away. "You must hear this! They wanted to bathe me, when I came here. D'you think I'd let them? NO!" he announced, like a thunderclap.

"Chambers!" called the attendant, almost sternly. And he subsided.

"Why didn't you tell me I was shouting?" he breathed. "Yes; they got all my clothes off, and the round bath all ready on the floor; three great fellows—you never saw such a to-do. And then, when the minute came, I bolted. I ran all round and round the place—round and round—and all of them after me. They couldn't hold me, you see—I was like a piece of buttered lard. I knew that I was acting within the law."

"Fancy!" said Tilly, as he paused to see the effect.

"It wasn't fancy," he told her. "I got right under a bed, and told them to get me out if they could. Well, they did—they hooked me out; some of them have got hooks for hands, if you notice. But I wasn't done! Three of them dragged me by arms and legs; and I kept very quiet a moment—and then got hold of the edge of the bath, and tilted it upside down, water and all, and swamped the place. And I was *not* bathed."

"What happened?" Tilly had to ask, almost forgetting in her compelled awe that he was an inmate. The sounds around her, that had begun so suppressedly and consciously, were swelling to quite a hubbub.

"Well, I hardly know," he said, with a thoughtful air. "But I was black and blue all over the next morning; so something must have happened. Let me see, now—don't move—let me think it out."

"James Westaway won't come—doesn't want to," announced an attendant, appearing at an opportune moment. Mr. Chambers forgot what he had been talking about, and sat back.

"Oh!" said Tilly, in blank dismay. "Oh! That is cruel of him. Would you—*would* you mind saying it's Tilly

here?—and that I've got something nice for him? Oh, thanks so much; I did want to see him again!"

"Tilly!" whispered some one, just as Mr. Chambers got a fresh grip on his narrative and upon Tilly; and Tilly turned with a start.

Alice Richards, although so very pale, looked almost happy. Her husband held both her hands, and was talking intensely, but quietly, while her eyes searched his as for some look she wanted to forget.

"Yes, I'm coming home," he was saying. "I must. You must manage it somehow, dear. If I'm away from you much longer, it will break me altogether. There's not an atom of reason why you should ever have been afraid of me; I can't understand it to this day. Darling, I'm not going to let you suffer like this—I'm coming home this time to stay, and take care of you. You're ill; and I'm miserable; and our lives are wearing away."

Alice's lips twitched almost uncontrollably. "Speak to Tilly," she could just say. "She'll be as pleased as I shall, I know!"

Tilly clasped the hand he held out. What she said she did not know. She was a little dazed; her cheeks flamed.

"I had so wanted to look at him again—and yet I was half dreading it, on your account," she told Alice afterwards. "I think I had dreamed of it every night. Of course, I'm upset enough about our Jimmy; but I know that's nothing at all to what you feel—your husband! I don't think I could bear it as you do—I know I couldn't. I should have to drag him out of the place, and fight my way through the streets with him, however bad he was!"

Unquestionably there was reason for Tilly's excitement, and for her many significant nods of delight to Alice. Victor Richards—tall, quiet and gentlemanly—was thin, and his curling brown hair had premature tinges of gray here and there; but there was blood and volition in his hand-grip, and his fine eyes remained

steady, and even sparkled now and then. On the last occasion of her visit here with Alice—Tilly would never forget it—he had come only as far as the distant door, and there stood, pallid and strange and staring as at something no one else could see; and nothing would induce him to take another step forward. Now, to-day, he was mentally back in his own world again, and reasoning quite cogently, and only mastering his impulses because there were others present.

"I'm coming home, treasure!" he repeated, firmly. "You have brought my hat and overcoat—that's quite enough. I am coming home to make you happy. I don't know how I have borne it as long as I have done."

After a while Tilly saw fit to turn her back upon the two, and watched wistfully the far closed door—her attention distracted at intervals by the movements of a gentleman occupied with a crab in a newspaper. Regularly, once a fortnight, a similar cooked crab, with claws broken into negotiable pieces, was brought to him by his thoughtful wife, who looked as if she had stinted herself to buy it; and regularly the same procedure was followed. The crab-loving husband retired apart, and was not to be disturbed until every shred of the delicacy had been eaten, every morsel of shell nibbled clean, and the newspaper thoroughly licked. Then, with a sigh of satisfaction or regret, and a "Come again as soon as you can" to his wife, he trudged from the room and back to his own quarters, all his interest evaporated.

Suddenly Tilly felt her elbow pressed from behind, and, almost for the first time in her experience, heard herself addressed as "Miss Westaway."

"Wouldn't that be your brother, Miss Westaway?" Victor Richards' deep, pleasant voice inquired. "I quite forgot—we only call him 'Jimmy' here. There he is."

"Where?" Snatching at her parcel, Tilly shot up, and was just in time to see a face withdrawing from sight

at the far door. It was a peaked, colorless face, with the close-cropped hair growing like a mass of bristles symmetrically planted to a Mephistophelian pattern—almost the counterpart of Gideon's. Tilly's tubby little figure made up the room at a great rate; greatly daring, she pushed back the door, got a grab upon his sleeve, and pulled him through into the safety-zone. The startled attendants subsided.

"You naughty boy!" panted Tilly, he being nearly two years younger than herself. "Look at that, now! D'you want to break my heart altogether?"

"I'd like to break mother's," he muttered—rather surprisingly, as his particular weakness took the form of a sullen silence and passivity, seldom dispersed. Evidently he had had his intervals of thought.

"Poor mother!" she observed, with a shocked sympathy that she was scarcely feeling. "Don't talk like that, Jimmy, or I shall drop coming. Now, sit down here, and be sensible. Mean to say you didn't want to know how they all are, and how Stepney's looking, and what I've brought you out o' my own money?"

Jimmy shook his head irritably, and resisted. Nevertheless, he watched sideways as she untied her parcel, and made a sudden lightning snatch at a twopenny packet of cigarettes.

"That's very greedy indeed," murmured Tilly, smiling to herself at the appreciation, however. "That's not acting like my brother at all. Still, as you've got it, I'll let you keep it. Only, mind, don't go giving it away to the attendant for an extra cup o' tea, as I found out you did before. Now, what d'you think o' this?—and this?—*and* this? These have come all the way from Highbury, so you know they're *good*. Enough for a fortnight, if you go careful, and don't gollop 'em all up to get rid of 'em."

Jimmy Westaway permitted himself to survey obliquely the various toothsome articles she unwrapped, but be-

trayed no emotion, or even passing interest. All the while, as he stood, he blew upon his fingers, and shuffled his feet on the floor as with an itching to be gone.

"Got a bit o' sugar?" he jerked out at length.

"Sugar?" echoed Tilly, in dismay. "Why, these are sweets—you don't want any sugar with 'em; you'd be sick. Try one—just taste one!"

Jimmy was firm. He took a furtive look along the room, and then feeling slyly in his pocket, produced what Tilly recognized to be a piece of common washing-soda, and began to nibble at it. Speechless, Tilly watched; and then, before she could anticipate the movement, he had turned and shuffled past the door like an old man in slippers, and was gone.

"I'd let him go," advised a friendly attendant. "He's all right by himself. You won't get anything out of him; we can't."

"It's a lump of soda!" said Tilly, swellingly. "He's eating it!"

"That's nothing; he's eaten worse things than that," was the reassuring reply.

"But he's so wasted—there's nothing of him," she gasped.

"Well, he won't eat anything," was the paradoxical explanation. "Still, he's better off here than he would be at home, p'raps. No use your worrying."

"Does he—does he give you much trouble in himself?" Tilly ventured anxiously, as if thinking that out-of-sight reprisals might have something to do with it.

And the man, who could have answered all these questions in his sleep, shrugged and smiled.

"A bit, p'raps. That's what they're here for, and we're here for. They've all got their own little ways. There's one tears his shirts to bits regular, on principle—what can you do, 'cept leave him without one? Then his friends write up and say he's catching consumption, and isn't

looked after. Here's a woman complaining and wanting to see the doctor because she finds her husband with a 'black' eye. We can't help it; he snatches another man's dinner regular, and the other man doesn't like it; and there you are. Still, Jimmy's all right, if you leave him alone in a corner and don't ask him to do anything."

"Isn't it dreadful—all of it?" whispered Tilly, in vague awe. "All these places seem full."

And the man, strolling to and fro, shrugged again.

"They'll want a lot more places yet, if they go on as they're going. Be worse still when their children—and *their* children—come in, won't it?"

"Don't!" said Tilly, with a shiver. "Thanks for doing all you can. I was going to give him a sixpence; I'll leave it just here under this bit o' paper instead, if you don't mind finding it."

Soon he obeyed a nod from somewhere, and struck a gong. There was a general reluctant movement, a final holding of hands, and an air of iron inevitability over all, as the inmates, in varying degrees of resignation, began to file back toward their quarters. Tilly stood sorrowfully back, until she felt her arm pressed tightly.

"You go, dear," Alice Richards said, outwardly very calm. "I may have to wait a long time—there is no need for you to."

"Oh, but I am going to," Tilly replied, with firmness to match. "I did think I'd have just time to gallop in home for a minute or two; but if I don't, I don't. Your husband gone?"

"He had to, you know. He was quite brave, dear. They'll tell him at once, one way or the other; at least, I hope they will." She tried to smile. "We forget we are only one in a hundred, don't we, Tilly?"

The long room had almost emptied. As if timing her effort, Alice Richards stepped forward and whispered something to a passing attendant.

"What's it for?" he asked, frowning.

"About—about my husband—Richards. Not a complaint."

The man hesitated, swung his bunch of keys, seemed inclined to point out the futility and eternal irksomeness of the request, and finally did the only thing practicable —complied with the rules.

"It just depends how many there are lined up to-night," he explained. "He'll see you right enough—if he can."

"I know that," said Alice, with just a tremor of relief. "I've thanked God for Doctor Dempsey. Would you mind my friend waiting with me?"

They followed him some way down the carpeted passage beyond, and there stood, prepared for an indefinite period of uncertain suspense. Comparatively soon, however, the attendant happened to pass that way again, appeared to recollect them, turned back, and presently reappeared, with a nod to Alice.

"You, ma'am—this way!"

"Bless you, dear," Tilly had just time to breathe. "Keep calm—keep steady!"

CHAPTER V

DOCTOR DEMPSEY just turned his head, as the door behind him opened and closed softly. Then he motioned to an arm-chair on the right of his desk, waited until she had sunk into it, and went on with his writing.

This room was the noiselessly beating heart of the place. In this room, with its hypnotic peace, seemed to be generated the silence and order that radiated throughout the building. And there at the writing-table sat the man who knew *all:* the man who had to tell as much of what he knew as appeared to him politic and merciful; the man whose power seemed more real and more sacred than that of a monarch.

Daily, almost hourly, he was swayed between his duty and his humanness—between this inner world and the outside world; and the finest proof of his fitness lay in a fact that by the outside world he was called "a wonder," and almost loved. The inside world was not capable of a fair judgment.

He was a tall, broad man, with a genial, handsome face, a trimmed, silvering beard, and unswerving, deeply seeing eyes. He seemed to know just why she was there, and, not being pressed to-night, allowed her time to compose her thoughts. Then at length he put down the pen, and sat back.

"Yes?" he asked, with his reassuring gentleness. "What is it this time, Mrs. Richards?" In the brief interval he had recalled her name and her case.

"I hope you know, Doctor—I think you do," he heard. "I want you to let my husband come home."

He looked at her keenly, the strong white fingers of one hand stroking his beard, and those of the other tapping the table.

"How do you mean? For a week—for a trial—as before?"

"For good, if it may be," she answered, gazing unflinchingly back, while the look of concentrated thought gathered in his eyes. He was mentally turning over the pages of the vast volume held in his brain, till he came to the entry: "Victor Richards—single dormant delusion recurring actively at uncertain intervals—query homicidal in extreme development." And then he sat forward again. This was ominous.

"Well, now, Mrs. Richards, there's just one thing—is it wise?"

"I trust so, and believe so this time, as God hears me," she said, firmly. "I must leave it with you to decide, Doctor Dempsey; but if I think that, I could not hesitate. He is my husband—my all in life. No woman can say it more truly than I."

"That is as it should be," he agreed, with the interest and compassion that made him seem "wonderful." "Let me see: you have had him home on two occasions—the first time for a month, and the second time for a week; and on each occasion you had to bring him back to us."

"Not I—not exactly——" She bit the lip that quivered. "Yes, Doctor, that is quite true."

"And now you wish to risk it again? Why? Do you see anything in him to-day that causes you to hope exceptionally——"

"A great deal," she told him, steadily. "He seemed so much better in every way a fortnight ago, that I began to hope again; to-day, I feel *sure*. Until a fort-

night ago, his despondency was almost more than I could bear. To-day, he is so completely himself that he would not let me see in the slightest degree his own suffering over the separation."

"Indeed? Well," he conceded, after more thought, "there is one thing, now you speak of it: I have had no reports upon his health for quite a considerable time. Just wait a moment—I'll make a few inquiries."

He went to a speaking-tube in the distant corner, and was engaged there for some minutes. Then he came back.

"Quite right; undoubtedly there is a great outward improvement; he has required no attention whatever lately. But, you see, Mrs. Richards"—he bent toward her—"I have such a sense of responsibility in a case like his. You are alone—at least, I presume so—I think I remember so. In case of any sudden slip-back on his part——"

"I love him," she said, simply. "I can watch him, night and day; and I can have faith in God, even although this has happened to take him from me. If only the bare hope exists. . . ."

He bowed again.

"Quite so. But, should there be any children——"

"There will be none," she said, just as steadily. And he sat back, still conscientiously thinking it out.

"You see, Mrs. Richards, the difficulty we are in. Not a day passes but I am implored to pass out patients on trial as cured or apparently cured; and hardly a day passes but that some are discharged permanently or temporarily; in fact, of course, that has to be our one aim, as so many fresh cases are crowding in from all sides. But I am bound to admit that a sad number drift back again, and their temporary freedom has not been—shall I say?—for the good of the community at large. What is to be done? In a great many cases the patients represent merely a burden to their friends, who

cannot, or will not, support it; but where there is a definite menace in the malady—or even a fear of it—then, for your own sake, I must ask, is it worth it?"

"You know my answer, Doctor Dempsey," Alice Richards whispered at once. And he almost smiled.

"Oh, I know your answer. I don't hesitate here, as I often must, through any idea that the home the patient is returning to is the worst thing that could happen to him. Let me see, now—Richards, Richards! The more violent the symptoms at the outset, you know, the more likely a cure. Your husband's delusion developed itself all at once, and without any warning, did it not?"

"Yes," he heard. "In the night—one night. He had over-studied, and failed in an examination. He slept badly, and had taken to a drug. He started up—as I thought, from some terrible dream; till I knew—till I knew that he had the knife in his hand."

"The knife—yes," repeated Doctor Dempsey, nodding at space. "Just so. Then you knew—then you knew that there was unconscious premeditation, apart from the dream-impulse; the knife had been secreted there. Yes, I remember quite well now: it was not yourself primarily whom he threatened——"

"Not his wife—no," Alice said, quickly. "That is why I do not think I had real cause to fear him, or need ever have. No; he believed that there was a man behind the door—a man who was waiting there to kill him. And it . . . it took all my strength to hold him away until the attack had passed, and he dropped back to the bed."

"How long?"

"Perhaps—perhaps half an hour."

"Perhaps an hour—or even two; just so! And then——?"

"He was exhausted, and seemed to know nothing of

what he had done. He would seem in a sort of stupor for days—or weeks."

"I see. And this happened several times, in just the same way, until his health gave way quite, and he sank into the despondency. Did he ever attempt to describe the 'man' behind the door—to give him a personality that you could recognize at all, if you tried?"

"No, Doctor—no! I think it was simply a phantom of his own imagination—just a figure that haunted him when the attack was coming on. I mean—I mean, the knife always seemed to be secreted in the room just beforehand, as if he had a premonition of the hour without knowing it. But he had no real living enemy in the world—that I can say beyond a doubt."

"And what was the general impression left upon you by the occurrence—after it had happened several times, we will say?"

"My impression——?"

"Ay! Sum it up to me now, if you have not cared to do so before; I think you are quite capable. That if, knife in hand, your husband had succeeded in reaching and opening the door, he would have dealt a blow, or blows, at the supposed figure?"

"Yes," said Alice, with difficulty. "His determination was as real as his dread while it lasted upon him—too real to mistake. And yet he is the most sensitive and lovable——"

"Never mind that. Do you tell yourself that, finding definitely his enemy behind the door to be quite a myth, his paroxysm would have left him, and his mind regained balance on the spot? Or that——?"

"I do," she said, after an instant. "I know what you are thinking, Doctor; but I do not believe it—no, I do not believe that!"

"And yet——"

"I know; I know!" Alice put in, appealingly. "He

was found in the street on that one occasion, and taken away, and brought here; but I hardly know what happened that time. Give him the benefit of that doubt, Doctor!"

"Singular," he mused, gripping his beard. "I talked his case over, I remember, with the County Asylum doctor; and we differed in theory, at any rate. Just possibly, if you were able to employ a specialist, and have him watched and tested over a protracted period, the psychology of his case would yield to some very simple experiment. There are apparently no complications. I don't mind telling you, Mrs. Richards, that as far as I know he has never developed an attack of the kind while in our hands here—although I believe one occurred at the County Asylum. Here, he has seemed quite normal except as regards the utter despondency. And that inclines me to think——"

"Yes——?" she breathed, as he paused carefully.

"One moment! I should like to know this. Have you been taken completely by surprise on each occasion —or are there any small signs by which you have come to anticipate an attack and prepare against it? Tell me quite truthfully."

"There are," she replied, looking away. "Small signs that would be visible only to watching eyes—his wife's eyes—perhaps; but that I do not think I could mistake now. I do not fear."

"She does not fear," repeated Doctor Dempsey to himself, as he turned and drew forward some tablets. "And you would know just what to do? You would not wait this time until anything happens, but send to us instantly to have him brought back? Instantly! If, on that understanding, I consent to——"

And Alice rose to her feet at once, with a tremor and a pallor that spoke for themselves. He put up his hand.

"Not to-night," he said, softly. "Not to-night."

"Not——?"

"No! You are quite able to bear that, Mrs. Richards. I will watch him myself for three days. Let's see—this is Friday; come and see me here on Tuesday. If I possibly can, I will pass him out on probation for six weeks—and then for a further period, according to results. Now, you go home, and be a brave little woman—and, in the meantime, just change your place of residence."

"Change my——?" the pale lips moved.

"Just so! Try what the change of environment—the position of that bedroom—the look of that door—and no mental worry whatever—may do for him. That is what I was about to suggest just now. Oh, Tuesday will come round—never fear! Good-night!"

Alice Richards got half-way to the door, and turned. He happened to glance round; so there was no need for her to try and voice her thoughts aloud; the fullness in her eyes was enough for Doctor Dempsey.

He put up his hand silently, soothingly. She passed out, and an arm hooked hers and drew her close almost before the door closed.

"That's enough," said Tilly, who had shot one quick look at her. "Don't say anything yet. I know it's all right—or will be. Just hang on to me."

And Alice rewarded her by moving very slowly and clinging very tightly to the stout support. Not, indeed, till they gained the blackly shining pavement outside did she seem to know just what was happening.

"There," said Tilly. "Stand a moment—never mind the rain. Now, what would you have done without me?—you'd have been lying in a faint outside his door, of course you would. Clever as he is, he couldn't see quite as deep as I could. . . . It's all right; I've got the parcel with his clothes. The man came up and told me they wouldn't let him go out to-night in any case—

they only do that when some poor fellow goes out in charge of an attendant for twenty-four hours special. I felt almost like knocking at that door and asking if a little something couldn't be done for Jimmy." She looked around sharply. "Yes, there's one. Come on!"

"One what?" faltered Alice, as she felt herself being lugged bodily across the road. "Oh, no—no!" she said, as she found herself halted level with a small public-house in the turning opposite. "Tilly——!"

"It's all right, dear," repeated Tilly, quite motherly. "I saw you needed something to take, if ever you did; and that's enough—that's the time to take it. Here we are—nice and quiet and empty—just made for us. Sit you down! A drop o' best port, miss, and a glass o' ginger-beer," she ordered, before Alice could part her lips again. Amazed, and yet truly grateful, Alice gazed around the tiny, triangular bar-compartment, which at the moment certainly presented no repellent aspect. "Sip it slowly—let it do you good," said Tilly, with immense composure, as she took her penny change out of sixpence. "Don't think I go drinking in public-houses, because I don't—although I should if I ever had occasion to; the stuff was sent for our use, and *we* can't help it if others don't know where to stop. Now, wasn't I right?"

"Yes, dear," said Alice, the smile dawning in her eyes again. "And I'm going to drink it quickly, and think afterwards, because I mustn't keep you another minute —I want you to think of your father and mother, as well as of me. You go, at once! I'll only tell you that I think I'm to have my dear one home on Wednesday—but that it must be in a new home—you shall know where, the moment I can write and tell you."

"You've got to 'move'?—the doctor says so?" gasped Tilly, quite forgeting her own ginger-beer. "I'm going —yes!—but, oh, dear, whatever will you do? Doesn't

it seem as if I ought to go back and tell the mistress I want three days 'off,' to help you? Couldn't I?—dare I? But I feel I must—I ought to——"

"Good-bye—good-bye!" said Alice Richards firmly, kissing her. They had regained the pavement somehow. "You shall know everything—I'll write!" And off swiftly she went.

"'Move' near me!" Tilly had just the presence of mind to call wildly after her.

For a moment Tilly stood there in a whirl of impulses, more than half inclined to follow and let everything else take care of itself. But the traffic came between, and her more sober outlook on existence returned.

"What a life!" she said to herself, as she wheeled in the other direction. "But, there, if it don't end in one way, it will in another."

CHAPTER VI

THERE was a handy short cut toward Tilly's objective—a tortuous succession of very narrow, depressing, dimly lit little streets where life seemed almost at a standstill, and the social atmosphere one of listless non-resistance to any knocks of Fate. A barefooted child scampered past now and again; a woman, with a shawl over her head, flitted across the roadway at intervals; but, generally speaking, a stranger might have thought the locality plague-stricken and deserted save by prowlers. And over all hung an odor that no rain or wind could disperse—a subtle commingling of fried fish, sewerage, gas-works and unwashed humanity. Tilly, accustomed now to spacious, select, fortunate Highbury, kept to the middle of the roadway as she scurried down mournful turning after turning.

But at length the blurred glow of light came into view, and a relieving hum of mixed sounds, loudly pulsed by the clang-clang of car-bells, filled the ears. With just three-quarters of an hour left to call her own, Tilly burst out into the main road a little beyond the Row—and ran full tilt into Bob Kingdom's arms; or, at least, into Bob Kingdom, for his arms always hung like great, still pendulums at his sides when he walked abroad. He was coming along in his usual leisurely, ruminative way, looking ahead as if mildly absorbed by something in the distance, his legs just propelled while the bulk of his big, solid body seemed at rest. It appeared quite

conceivable—quite inevitable, indeed,—that if commanded to appear at Court, Bob Kingdom would walk up as abstractedly as if sent for to hang a picture or examine a drain.

"Hullo," he said, coming to a halt and rolling a reflective glance down over her, as though to see whether she had altered in any way. "That water-pipe going all right?"

"Good gracious," laughed Tilly, wondering a little why she had paused, too. "I've never given that another thought. Oh, yes, you mended it, didn't you?"

"Patched it a bit, like. Couldn't make a job of that; ought to come up—old houses," he told her. "Things all right?" he queried, with a nod toward Porter Street.

"Don't ask me," said Tilly, rather quietly. "I shan't know till I've been in. It's a case of hoping for the best. You saw a little for yourself, didn't you?"

"Thought things might be a bit brighter, in a way," he admitted, gazing profoundly at a little mole on her chin. "Upsets you a bit, eh?"

"Well, it needn't—but it does," she said. "I s'pose it's me being away from it now, and seeing things so different. I never used to think much of it at one time, but just lately I—well, you know. When I haven't been near for a month or more, I feel half afraid to go in, for fear of hearing what's happened! They never put pen to paper, or even pencil—that's too much to expect."

"Like letters?" he asked, slowly running his great hand under his cap.

"Like letters? Well, I s'pose I'm like most people—like most women, at any rate. I never get any, if that's anything; although I generally try to *think* the postman's got one. Do you?—like letters, I mean?"

Bob Kingdom seemed to think this a stupendous, far-reaching question, and studied it accordingly.

"Never thought about it," he confessed. "S'pose I should, if I had any—eh?"

"Well, you write me one, and I'll write you one," cried Tilly, on a whimsical impulse that came quite involuntarily. "There you are, now!"

And Bob Kingdom took the hand from his hair, and stared at her, as if struck by the force of the suggestion. It was apparent, at any rate, that he had never been approached just as directly on the point before.

"I might," he reflected. "Don't do much of an evening, do I? Suppose you didn't get it, though?"

"Get it? Of course I should get it—if only for a joke," said Tilly, annoyed to think she had flushed a little. "But, there, go on!—don't tell me you never write to anybody—or never have done it. You'd be the very first man who hadn't, I should say."

"Very likely I am, too," he replied, not at all put out by the implied lack of manliness. He scratched his head with the other hand. "Don't say I mightn't do one —or a couple—if you like 'em."

"What about?" queried Tilly, curiously, more softly. "Whatever should we have to say to each other?"

"That's the thing, ain't it?" he pondered, eying her deeply still. Bob Kingdom's mother was the only one with a theory as to this oblique attitude of his. She maintained that he was really diffident—almost nervous in the presence of the other sex; but that his skin was too thick to betray it. "Think o' something when you make a start, I expect. News o' the day, and so forth. Try it, eh?"

"Well, I call it very good of you," murmured Tilly, really impressed. "I don't mind in the least what you say, or how you write it; people don't know what the postman's knock means, if it's only with a dummy, when you're all alone in the bottom half of the house all day long, and feel shut off from everybody. That's my ad-

dress, at any rate—where I'm to be found, I mean; I know yours, don't I?" She pushed a crumpled little card—one of her mistress's—hurriedly into his hand, and turned. "Must be off now—my time's very nearly up. Good-night, Mr. Kingdom, I'm sure!"

"Here!" He took something from his pocket and pushed it into her hands in turn—a large apple. Bob Kingdom, being practically a teetotaller and non-smoker, bought apples and munched them as he went along. "Shouldn't hurry—get run over. Take it easy. Good-night!—might find me writing some time or other."

"Well, we're coming to something!" Tilly said audibly to herself as she flitted on, surprised to find that she did not feel altogether like laughing. "Whatever will he say in it?—Whatever should I find to say back?"

The front door of number eleven, Porter street, stood wide open. Tilly burst through, pushed open the kitchen door, and drew up as if ashamed of her precipitancy. Only her father was there; and he sat at the table in a crouching attitude—head resting between his propped and clenched hands. A plate containing two slices of bread-and-dripping—presumably his evening meal—had been pushed as far as possible from him. He looked across at her as in a semi-stupor, unable or unwilling to rouse.

"What's up, father?" breathed Tilly, her heart beating fast for no explained reason. "Where's mother?"

"Couldn't say," he replied, strainingly, but lifelessly.

Tilly moved forward, and stood irresolute, knowing it was of no practical use to show what she felt.

"You're not put out because I didn't come earlier?" she ventured. "I couldn't very well, not as it turned out; I've been to see Jimmy."

"Go where you like, my gel," he answered. "I can't expect you to want to come here. It's no home for a dog; but it's good enough for your father—out o' work,

dead to the world, and with a wife that can forget she's a woman!"

"Oh!" said Tilly. "Oh, father!" Her sob got loose, and a whole series followed it; she simply let herself go, dropped her umbrella and small parcel, dragged his arms from the table, and hugged his head forcibly to her breast. The man seemed too surprised and overwhelmed to resist. "It's not that—no, it's not that!" she cried, vehemently. "It's my old home, whatever it is—and I love it—and I won't have you talk like that, as if everything's done for, now I'm gone. . . . I know what I'm going to do!—I'm coming home again. Yes, father, yes!—you want me here to look after you; that's quite enough!"

Mr. Westaway feebly disengaged himself, looked all round the room, and heaved his thin shoulders suggestively.

"Lot o' good you doing that," he said. "It's too late to think of anything o' that sort—everything's too late. You don't suppose I care a jot what becomes o' the place, or what happens now? Not a jot, my gel; but you're well out of it."

"Sometimes," said Tilly, clenching and unclenching her fingers, "sometimes I feel I shan't be able to hold myself in—I shall forget myself and do something to mother. I shall!"

And he laughed—a weak, rattling laugh; and struck the table twice with his open hand, as with inward irony that he would not vent in words.

"Where is she?" Tilly demanded. "Where does she find the money?—that's what I want to know."

"Can't say. Here's my sum total." He drew out his trousers' pockets, and showed them to her—quite empty. "Beautiful lot, ain't we, my gel? Six weeks since I did any stroke o' work to speak of—and long odds against my getting any now till after Christmas. People don't *want* you: don't want to see you, or hear of you! There

is no work, Tilly!—it's no use you coming home to look at me like that, as if I could help myself. When I'm dead and gone, people 'll say: 'How hard!—how terrible!' . . . I went after a job this morning. There was a pack o' chaps crowded in front o' me. I'd had a bit o' breakfast —never mind what; p'raps some o' them hadn't. They started fighting to get foremost. I come away. When, I say,"—he struck the table differently this time—"when, my gel, a man's got to use his fists and knock others down to get a job and pay his way—well, then—well, p'raps I'd better not say. . . . You're looking pretty well, Tilly, —a bit thinner in face than you were, p'raps."

Tilly did not hear. She stood very still, her hands now clasped before her, her eyes somber and misty.

"Don't *you* go worrying," he observed. "I'm only one in a thousand—in a million, from all I can see of it. There's no remedy—*no* remedy! But you're all right. You keep as you are, and don't marry, and spend your money, and enjoy yourself if you can; for if you get like me and your mother"—he gritted his teeth and swung his arm illustratively—"you'll be ground down and trod on and shoved out o' the world as a nuisance. You know me, my gel; you know I've tried, and kept steady, and walked my feet off to find work sooner than cadge a penny. And I've lost heart. But that don't matter; I wouldn't have minded if I hadn't—if I hadn't had to sell my tools to save what's left o' the home. . . . Think it was worth savin'? Look at it!"

"Where does mother find the money?" repeated Tilly, mechanically.

"Where? Well," he said, with a certain grim sense of fairness, "I don't think you'd better talk like that of your mother—that's only my look-out. I don't say she 'finds' any. She ain't here now, so I can say it. What she does, is, to go out and forget herself—let everything slide. If there's no money coming in, she's reckless; she's not one

o' the sort that 'll knuckle under and get a day's washing somewhere. I'm all that's bad, because I can't keep in work. She'll never alter now—she'll die drunk, and tell the Almighty she was driven to it. Somebody 'stands' her the drink—she don't pay for it herself, that's certain."

"But they couldn't give her the penny to bring home—no!" whispered Tilly.

"I wouldn't take it," Westaway said with a fierce laugh, as he got up. "You can always remember that of your father: if he couldn't earn his money by the hands God above gave him, he wasn't having any. Tilly, when you look back on all I've gone through, just to keep alive—well, you don't wonder there's thieves and murderers about on every hand. I don't."

"You've been a good father to me—that's all I want to think of," Tilly said, tremblingly. "I can't return it more than I do out of five-and-nine a week. If I thought it 'ud help you for a bit, I'd pawn the clothes off my back at this minute—but it wouldn't. But it's enough—it's enough to break any one's heart, to go back to my work there and know it's all for nothing—just to save you having to keep another mouth filled."

She took up her umbrella. There seemed nothing more to be said to-night—nothing to be done. It seemed advisable, indeed, from the sensations gathering in her throat, to be gone as soon as possible.

"Good-bye, father!" she said, with a cheerful choke. "God bless you! Sounds empty—but I can't say more."

"No, you can't," was all he said, as he gave her a quick kiss and turned away.

Passing along that comparatively dim patch of the main road—the section that for some reason had never prospered or developed business activity—Tilly heard a sound that, although fugitive and subdued, was sufficiently arresting to make it seem she had started from a dream—or dropped into one.

It was a little trill of lip-music—a soft, seductive, flute-like series of notes, followed by tentative twitterings, like those of an unseen bird calling to its mate from a thicket. It brought Tilly to a standstill, her breath held, her flesh prickly hot, her mind darting back to old days when Bert Lovell had stood idly at street corners, whistling with scarcely a movement of his lips, and making passers-by stare up to locate a lark in a cage. Save Bert Lovell, she knew of no one in the world who could whistle in that sweetly cooing, deceptive fashion.

It had stopped. She gazed all around her very earnestly and narrowly, but could see no likely person. No one was quite near at the moment, indeed, except a bent-backed beggar at the curb, who had a patch over one eye, and whose other eye was presumably unsound, or he would never have planted himself appealingly at that particular spot—just level with Mr. Kingdom's shop. Then, just as she called herself a silly thing, and went on, it trilled out anew.

Tilly spun round as if some one had struck her from behind, and stared quite wildly. Bert Lovell himself might be what she had tried to think him—a thing of the past; but the music of the whistling lips opened all the floodgates of memory; it made the fact that she could hear, and yet not see, almost maddening. Somebody in the flesh—not in her own brain—was mocking her.

There!—where?—the low, prolonged twittering again. And yet no one save herself—not even the beggar close at hand—could seem to hear anything. Tilly suddenly dug a finger in each ear, broke into a run, and only slackened when well into the blaze of shop-light beyond.

"What a day!" she said to herself, as the "Angel"-bound bus picked her up and whizzed off again. "Feel just as if I'd gone out young and come back middle-aged!"

CHAPTER VII

OH, that's what you think, is it? Well, snow or slosh or snivel, it don't make any difference to me, my dear feller. If you don't like it, there's my advice; shut your shop, and emigrate; and there's an end of it."

The three days of drizzling rain had ended. It was Monday, with a nippy wind swooping round the corners in annoying gusts; and Mr. Kingdom's remark was intended for the tradesman next door, who had pointed mournfully to the dust and grit accumulating on his sliced bacon, and complained that the weather in England was getting something unbearable.

Mr. Kingdom himself had come to his doorway and looked both ways as if wondering what had become of all the customers; but this impression was misleading. It was the belief for a mile around that he wanted no customers, and kept his establishment open just to show that he could do without them.

"There's the stuff," he said. "If anybody wants it, they can have it; if they don't, well and good—there it stays."

And there it did stay—to the secret amazement and mental agony of the strenuous provision-dealer next door. At this moment, well on into the evening, Mr. Kingdom had one small light burning in his shop—a glimmer just sufficient to show the nature of the stock, and the tarnishing traces of time upon it. Perhaps once a week Mr. Kingdom went round and flicked the most prominent articles with an aged duster; and that was all.

In the window-space itself were two antique basins filled with old coins, a bronze statuette or two, a collection of old-fashioned trinkets and medallions, a coral necklace, a Zulu spear, a marble clock without works, a stuffed snake, an embalmed flamingo in a case, several pewter tankards, and a printed notice: "Old gold and silver of any description bought for prompt cash,"—these last two words, being underlined, giving Mr. Kingdom an importance in the vicinity that could scarcely be over-estimated. The one incongruous feature that had lately found its way into the grouping, and that rather weakened the atmosphere of touch-me-not antiquity, was a bundle of sticks of solder, which some extraordinarily expert sample-agent had induced Mr. Kingdom to stock at twopence per patent stick. They could be bought in the thriving shopping-zone farther down the road at a penny; but Mr. Kingdom had no intention of reducing his own price to that level just to force a sale.

In the shop beyond were several pieces of furniture that irresistibly recalled the "Mistletoe-Bough" period, and an enormous glass-fronted case filled with old watches, metal ware, cracked china, and the like; while above the case hung a huge, priceless picture. At least, no one apparently could soar to the figure put upon it by Mr. Kingdom, who had inherited it with the shop from his dead parent, and who often paused with arms akimbo and glared vindictively up at it. The subject of the picture was not distinguishable at a glance; but, beneath the dust and blisters, it represented a naked lady lying pensively upon her right side, no doubt awaiting a bath, while cupids in mid-air pointed down at her as at a curiosity—the which, unquestionably, she was from a carping point of view.

There was a dark, dusty room beyond, in which Mr. Kingdom sat and smoked, grunted over the newspaper, and drank bottled beer—emerging now and then to

scowl askance at the movements of the dealer in perishables next door. This latter had never been forgiven for his temerity and want of consideration in coming and converting empty premises into a bacon-and-cheese store.

"I'll give you jest three months, my dear feller," Mr. Kingdom had estimated on the spot. "Three months! If you ain't consumin' your own stuff and burnin' your counter for firewood by then—well, you'll be somethin' out o' the common, that's all. The last man that started there was givin' his treacle and fly-papers away at the finish. I ain't sure he didn't drown hisself somewhere in the end. I'll find out for you."

The exact cause of Mr. Kingdom's marked and unabated hostility was not known; but possibly, the shop on either side having stood empty for so long, he had come to feel a sort of unratified right to his isolation. Just as likely, again, he resented the nature of the goods displayed, and the fact that the provision man had placed a long carving-block outside, with a wind-screen on either side, thus belittling the public view of his own premises.

"Leave it alone, for heaven's sake," he was moved to comment, as the other man cut off yet another slice from his blocks of bacon, to freshen them more enticingly, and placed the slices clean side up on the sevenpenny pile. "How many more times are you going to hack it about, jest to make a show? Put up 'bacon for sale,' and done with it—do!"

"I know what I'm doing," retorted the other, shakily pacific. "Every man to his trade, if you don't mind." He was a thin, very fair, man, with watering eyes, and very red hands, upon which he kept breathing hard in the intervals of slicing; and he had been weak enough to tell Mr. Kingdom that he had only a few pounds of his capital left, and dared not encroach upon it. "It's a very

strange thing you always seem to want to pick a quarrel; I don't know why."

"Me?" said Mr. Kingdom, very forcibly. "Me quarrel with you? Don't you think anythin' o' that, my dear feller; that's ridic'lous. I'm only sorry for you, 'cause I can see you bein' carried out shortly. Oh, I say it, and I mean it!—there's no bushel-basket bis'ness about me; and I'm known for miles round."

"I'm sure," agreed the other, with a sniff. He had come to feel rather uncomfortable under the sustained bullock-like glare of his next-door neighbor—rather conscious that his little "trimming" efforts would appear niggling and petty at that distance. "There's one thing, however," he added, with a burst of independence. "You're not asked to buy anything; but your own wife hasn't been above giving me a little friendly turn now and again, for all that."

"Oh, hasn't she?" queried Mr. Kingdom. He used a large red-silk handkerchief with suitable emphasis. "Well, I s'pose she took pity on you. P'raps she give it away; I ain't seen anythin' of it; I should recognize your stuff anywhere, if that's anythin' to go by."

"I'll take your word. I know you don't like me; but I'm here to stay," countered the other, with a cheerful wave of his knife. He slapped several of his bacon-chunks into fresh position, and stepped up close as on impulse. "It's like this, Mr. Kingdom: if you can't be even civil, you needn't go out of your way to stop a man trying to work up his bis'ness. That's what you do do!—that's what you're trying your hardest to do, I should say."

"Not me," said Mr. Kingdom, looking him up and down as a sort of freak. "I can't help what you think, can I? If I wanted to make myself seen and heard, I should call the police down about them stinkin' lard-tubs you keep out at the back—them margarine bar-

rels, or whatever you call 'em. It ain't me that stops people buyin'—it's the look o' your stuff does that, if you ask me."

"So you've said before. What's the matter with it?" persisted the other, suppressing himself creditably. "Come, why don't you say outright what you mean, and give me a handle to lay hold of?"

"Handle? Who's talking about handles? Can't people see for themselves? Can't they go two hundred yards up the road and get your tenpenny stuff for six-and-a-half? Why, confound me, it *ain't* bacon!" he declared, warming to it in proportion as the other's eyes watered. "If you really want to know what I think about it, I should call it pickled belly o' pork, jest smoked up to make it cut solid. And that bloomin' ham you've got in there—to my knowledge you was servin' off it three weeks ago, and I can't open my door without knowin' it's there still. It's rank, my dear feller—downright rank!"

The provision man looked all around as if wishing a third party could hear this, and justify him in taking a drastic step. Failing this, he contented himself with saying: "Go on! Anything else, now you've begun?"

"Lots," said Mr. Kingdom, with pity. In the brief challenging pause his stare had focused two small boys hovering suspiciously beyond the further wind-screen. One had a sheaf of evening papers under his arm, and the second—Gideon Westaway—had been gaining experience in the art of selling the same; but both, for the moment, appeared to be on the prowl. "Lots! I told you when you come here, if you haven't got the best goods to sell, and can stand sellin' 'em under price as a 'draw' to start with, you don't stand a dog's chance against the big shops lower down. Course, you had your own way. Ask yourself!—look at your eggs there! Why don't you wash 'em? They look as if they'd been all round the world, and 'ud bust in your face if you go

near 'em. I've never seen eggs like 'em—never. Where you buy 'em, heaven knows. No self-respectin' hen 'ud have anythin' to do with 'em, let alone a human bein'."

It was seldom that the exchange of commercial opinions reached this acute point. Very nearly crying, the egg-purveyor swallowed several throat-lumps; and then pointed earnestly.

"Never mind my eggs. Drop them——"

"Shouldn't like to, for your sake," interposed Mr. Kingdom. But he held on manfully.

"Drop them, I say; they're nothing. The place itself is kept clean; and that's everything. Turn round and look into your own. It's a disgrace. That's from me to you, Mr. Kingdom; and you've got your remedy."

For an appreciable instant Mr. Kingdom reserved his right to reply. He had seen a peaked, pallid, ferrety little face peer round the farther wind-screen, followed by a fumbling hand. Gideon Westaway, the other boy's cat's-paw, curled his tongue slyly, closed his fingers upon something weighing at least three pounds, and was off.

"There goes your bacon," said Mr. Kingdom, snapping finger and thumb almost triumphantly. "Serves you right, for shovin' it outside." And the horrified provision-dealer stumbled round, to stare from his board to two diminishing small figures that it would have baffled any one to pursue.

Gideon Westaway and his trainer, diving down the first side-street, felt it quite safe to halt in a doorway and consider the position. Bacon, however valuable, could not be gnawed in the raw; and the question was—who would be likely to give twopence for the piece without having recourse to blackmail in the next moment?

Sheer luck came to the rescue, in the shape of another foraging party of boys old enough to appreciate a bargain. One of these had been successful to the extent of a threepenny tin of condensed milk; this, with a farthing,

he proffered for the bacon; and Gideon clinched instantly.

By a dexterous movement, Gideon managed to lose touch with his own ally, and made for a small "general" shop where he knew the woman to be gouty and purblind. Here he purchased a farthing's worth of sherbet —purloining a tablet of soap while she groped for a piece of paper to hold the sherbet. A little later, in a secluded spot, he had wrenched a heel-tip from his boot, and prised open the milk-tin, sustaining only a trivial cut or two. In went the sherbet. Gideon thoroughly stirred the mixture—and then ate it—licking the tin afterwards as far down as his practiced tongue would go. Then feeling a trifle bilious, but not satiated, he strolled out again into the main road to see what offers were forthcoming for a cake of soap. Gideon, unconsciously, was doing his little best to live up to his social environment.

CHAPTER VIII

FAIRLY well satisfied, Mr. Kingdom had retreated into his shop, clapped on a full-sized bowler hat, buttoned the top button of his coat—the lower ones being superfluous—and stepped aside into the passage.

"Out!" he sent up the staircase in a voice that left no room for excuse or misconstruction.

This, an intimation that he would be gone for a more or less indefinite period, was intended only for Mrs. Kingdom—the shrinking, timid little woman who seldom emerged from the upper regions, being like a fugitive mouse on the premises. Sometimes she was observed nodding and becking to no one in particular from an upper window, and occasionally she was seen to flit out late at night for shopping purposes; but Mr. Kingdom evidently preferred that she should maintain her proper deferential place in the background. There were two small peculiarities about Mrs. Kingdom: she had a touch of palsy, which kept her head in an almost constant shake; and her wrinkled little face, when seen, seemed always about to break into a glad smile, which she seemed to fear to allow to break.

Mr. Kingdom banged the shop door, locked it, gave it a testing drive with his fist, and set out—followed by the envious, moist-eyed gaze of the provision-dealer next door. His head well back, his frontal bulk carried agressively, he moved with a studied deliberation that, if slightly elephantine, passed very well in the neighborhood for dignity and a sense of affluence combined. An electric

car approached as he went to step from the curb, and gave a mild warning; Mr. Kingdom simply kept on at his measured roll, without a glance to left or right; and the car, clang-clanging furiously, was made to pause with a jerk.

"You ought to be locked up," dared the much-tried driver; but Mr. Kingdom ignored him with rare restraint.

Eyes bulging steadily, less with interest than indifference for any one or anything he passed, he made his way through the brightly-lit shopping area beyond. There were motionless thin people, threatening to starve, stooping at the curbs; there were wistful, hungering faces pressed close against eating-house windows, breathlessly watching the pies, the frills of parsley, the simmering sausages, and the cunning little cuts in the curled eels; there were women, carrying inert mites of babies in a bit of a shawl, who paused every now and then and looked about them as if mutely asking God Almighty whether He *could* do anything for them. But there were also piano-organs briskly played, laughing and pushing girls, piles of cheap and splendid food, and shop-keepers shouting their wares and their jokes in full-lunged optimism; and so, for Mr. Kingdom, the scales swung evenly—the whole blended itself into a fairly decent mosaic. Indeed, he had his own fixed opinions as to penury and its allied inconveniences; he mantained solemnly that to alleviate distress, sirs, was simply to encourage it to grow. Chloroform, he contended, was the one cure for social failures. And by failures he meant especially those who married and brought large families into the world without a reserve fund—without any business methods or consideration for other people—and then expected to be dug out of their morass as a matter of course.

"Choke 'em," he said, decisively. "And you can choke me, too, if you ever find me comin' the same game.

They're barnacles; they're bankrupts who bust their capital and won't pay a farthin' in the pound; they're the curse o' the strugglin' tax-payer who cuts his coat accordin' to his cloth. Choke 'em; and let's have room to breathe."

Bent purely upon relaxation, Mr. Kingdom passed by all the brilliant, main-road public-houses—which, in his opinion, balanced their high rentals with watered beer—and pushed open the swing-door of one tucked quietly away down a side-thoroughfare. This was the semi-private, or three-ha'penny, compartment—with just a sufficient touch of the stiff, old-fashioned style to keep it exclusive and lend clients an air of masonic distinction.

A fair muster of the evening "regulars," never very unpunctual, was already in evidence, and the swinging door let out a spirited buzz of argument—all the great questions of the day being threshed out to a solution here sooner or later; but the noise subsided noticeably upon Mr. Kingdom's appearance. In fact, there was an uncertain lull; speakers who had begun to say something impressive, struck matches instead; others stood back, partly effacing themselves as by force of habit; two or three remarked: "Evenin'! Evenin', Mr. K.!" almost respectfully, if a shade perfunctorily—the tacit general idea seeming to be that a big man always carries "weight."

Advancing up to the bar, with a short nod here and there, Mr. Kingdom called for his "usual," obtained it, and then, without turning, sank his full weight to the one stool in the corner. Occasionally the stool in question was already occupied by a customer; but Mr. Kingdom never noticed this until the customer arose rather quickly, when he said: "Hullo, hurt yourself? Don't mention it!" and retained his seat. Once, a long time back, but not forgotten, Mr. Kingdom had marked his appearance by paying for refreshment all round; and

there was still no knowing whether the galvanizing impulse might not some time or other take him again.

"Well?" he queried bluntly, after only just wiping the froth from his lips. "All done, are you? Have you killed the Government and shoved a new one in? Or am I a bloomin' Jonah, or what?"

His humorous dig, for once, was ineffectual. "Another murder," calmly interposed the barmaid, yawning, as she handed across the latest evening-paper edition.

The sheet was opened out, its general contents scanned with casual comments—the racing results studied with the enigmatical silence which impresses—and the murder absorbed. The fact that it had taken place, once more, within a mile of that bar, lent it additional interest, as proving yet again that blood was hotter in some localities than others. A man, it appeared, annoyed by the taunt of some woman, had drawn his revolver, shot her in four places, and walked off to consort with some one less provoking. Comment fixed upon the point that things were becoming quite Italian in the swiftness of procedure, and that it would soon be unsafe to walk through some of the East-End quarters without a Western cowboy's training in reserve.

Mr. Kingdom, who had used his red-silk handkerchief arrestingly twice without being noticed, used it again. It was quite understood that, if not allowed the lead in any argument, he had no real interest in it. Accordingly, he took the lead.

"Now, look here," he said; "the thing is, do any of you know what you're talkin' about? Because any street you like to name is as safe as any other, pro-vidin' you ain't lookin' for trouble, and shovin' your nose right into it. What's the facts? These are the facts—or one of 'em. I go down them streets, day in and day out; and they don't shoot *me*. Is that so, or ain't it?"

"Oh, well—!" admitted one man, as the others seemed

floored. "That ain't the point; that's straining it, any way. You never *know,* do you? All I've got to say, is, you can't pick up a newspaper any day without——"

"Yes, you can," he insisted, clearly in one of his most combative moods. "Moreover, that's nothin' whatever to do with it. You said, if you said anythin' at all—well, blessed if I know what you did say, now. All I know is, you were wrong."

"That's my glass, excuse me," hastily said the other man, as Mr. Kingdom went to drink.

"Don't be huffy," said Mr. Kingdom, with feeling. "Stout, ain't it? I don't drink stout, my dear feller, 'cause I dunno what becomes of all the 'black' in it. I never see such a man—your back's up at once, when you start talkin'."

"That's as it may be," replied the other, guardedly. "There's one thing: I'm open to be told where I'm wrong. I don't come out every night with the idea of 'downing' everything and everybody. I could lay my hand on some people that seem to."

He escaped the full force of Mr. Kingdom's concentrated gaze by reaching out for a light for his pipe, and presently felt it safe to resume.

"Well, it's a perfect marvel to me where all these revolvers come from, or how they get hold of 'em. People seem to have 'em in their desks all ready for suicide, you read of accidents with 'em nearly every day, and them hooligans think nothing of whipping one out when they're cornered nowadays. The street-kids 'll soon be practicing with 'em, if you ask me. I don't reckon there's one in a hundred people with pistols that could show a license."

"There isn't," followed up another man, confidently. "I wonder it's allowed. Half these murders and other things 'ud never happen if it wasn't for them things being so handy; they'd have to fall back on a punch

under the ear, same as it used to be. If it ain't what they call putting a premium on crime, what is it? Why ain't it stopped? What's any man want a revolver for, if he ain't got some likely thing in his mind? What right has he to have it?—he's a walking, living danger. Here, they won't sell a man a packet of poison—what's the difference?"

The first speaker spat, to express complete agreement.

"They could stop it in a minute, if they wanted; that's what gets over me. The police know there's no real use for revolvers in this country—'cause you mustn't even kill a burglar with one, on any account; yet you can see windows full of 'em, and any half-baked boy can go in and get one. Stands to reason he ain't going to keep it without having a shot at something or somebody. Why don't they stop the sale, and say that no one but army chaps shall be allowed to possess one? They could, if they wanted; and no one 'ud say a word."

"That's jest it, you thickhead; they don't want to," announced Mr. Kingdom. "They could stop all crime, if it comes to that; but they won't. Why not? Because it 'ud mean disbandin' the police, and throw about another half-million men on the rates. That's why."

"Don't see it at all; you're going a bit too far, as usual," was the cool comment—anticipated by Mr. Kingdom.

"Oh, no, my dear feller," he retorted, in his fullest, blandest tones. "Don't mind bein' told, do you? It's plain; only you can't see it. The police ain't killin' their gold-egg goose—'tisn't likely. You wouldn't go and burn down your employer's premises, would you? I say again"—he slapped the counter to rivet attention—"I say again they could all but put a stop to crime if they wanted. Now, then!"

"Well, how?" demanded some one courageously. And Mr. Kingdom wheeled upon him.

"How? I dunno who you are, mister, or what you've been drinkin'; but I'll tell you. Increase the penalty, and it's done. And they know it—and you know it."

The man thought hard. "Think so?" was his doubtful reply.

"No, mister, I don't think—I'm sure. Look at your facts—pick up your newspaper any day, as this gent on my right is so fond o' sayin'. Take a burglar, as he jest spoke of. What d'you find? That nearly all of 'em are jest poppin' in and out o' jail all their bloomin' time on earth. 'Three years, you wicked rotter,' says the beak. Well and good. In he goes—does his three years on his head—does about a dozen more burglaries—and pops in again for another rest. What's he care?—it's all one to him, s' long as he has a good time in between. And so the pretty little game goes on. Because you don't really reckon you're goin' to reform any professional burglar, do you?—any more than you can turn a ginger feller into a black 'un? If he's built that way, he goes accordin', don't he? Can you see *that?*"

"Go on," said the other, anxious to let some one else attract the "parboiled" glare.

"I'll go on," obliged Mr. Kingdom, satisfied that the interest had extended to adjoining bar-compartments. "Bear in mind, mister—as you'd be the first to, if you had one in your place any night—it ain't simply what your burglar *takes;* it's what he leaves behind. Unnerstand that? You might happen to have a wife or what not on the spot, and jest possibly she mightn't be feelin' quite herself, as the sayin' is—and you dunno to a word what the upset's goin' to do for that woman, whoever she is. Or it might be your old aunt, or your daughter, if you've got one—it's all the same. That's the part that doesn't come out in the p'lice-court; but that's as often as not the shockin' part of it. You might be surprised, my dear feller, if you got to know how many

a man's had a wreck of a female left on his hands through the scare. She ain't ever the same woman again, and she'd faint if her husband went out for five minutes. *That's* what I'd make a burglar pay for—what they call the moral, over and above the material, damage. That's me!"

A suitable pause.

"And what would you do?" asked the barmaid unexpectedly at Mr. Kingdom's back.

"You clear out of it, and I'll say," he advised. And she retired discreetly, if reluctantly. "What would I do, eh? Well, there's two things could be done; and one of 'em ought to have been done long ago. When you find a bug in your bed, you don't shove it in a matchbox for a few nights and then put it back in the bed on the off-chance it won't bite, do you? Very well, then!—ain't a burglar a national bug? The police, at this moment I'm talkin', know every professional wrong 'un there is in London, and know pretty well where to lay hands on 'em—that's as certain as anything ever was in this world. They could make a clean sweep of 'em, in one week, as easy as brushin' flies off a wall. If they don't want to—if they haven't got the heart to upset 'em—there's the other thing. My Gawd, gimme a free hand, and I'd stop burglary! Gimme ten minutes on the Bench, and I'd make it so hot for 'em that they'd soon put up the shutters. Know what I'd do?" He leaned forward, tapping one large open hand on the other convincingly. "I'd brand him on both cheeks, operate on him a bit, and shove him on a desert island, with a barrel of beer anchored and bobbin' up and down jest out at sea."

There was another appropriate pause. The customers looked at one another more or less uncertainly.

"Think that 'ud stop it?" one ventured, feeling something must be said.

"Would it?" boomed Mr. Kingdom. "Well, it 'ud go a bloomin' good way towards it. My argument is, if they can stamp out small-pox, they can stamp out anythin' they like. They can give him fair and reasonable warnin', mind you. They can say: 'If you don't chuck this burglary bis'ness right off the reel, that's what you're booked for'; and I reckon he'd think twice, when he come to look at it all ways. What's three years in penal to that sort o' feller? It's jest a hair-cut and a pick-me-up. One desert island 'ud be ample. Ample!"

"Yes, it's a rum world all round," some one else was inspired to add. "Get rid of one evil, and up springs another. No doubt about it."

"Eh?" queried Mr. Kingdom bluntly, his own flow diverted. "What's he mean? What's he ramblin' about?" And the startled person reddened a little.

"Why, what you were just saying," he explained. "Get rid of your wrong 'uns, and what about all your policemen? There's enough unemployment as it is, I meant."

"Is there?" Mr. Kingdom had the beer-glass halted half-way to his mouth, as in astonishment. "Oh, is there? And whose doin's that, might I ask?"

"Whose doing?" faltered the transfixed one.

"Ay! Don't chew the cud, man—answer the question. I dunno whether you're an employer of labor or not; but if you had twenty two-pound-a-week jobs to give away, and found forty men scramblin' for 'em, wouldn't you bring your figure down to a pound a week on the spot? I should say so; you don't look to me the sort to give money away for nothin'. Very well, then! And yet, what with your twenty employed men havin' no money to spend and keep trade busy, and what with the taxes goin' up to support the other twenty in workhouse or jail, you ain't a real ha'penny better off at the finish. D'you see that?"

"Well, I can *see* it," owned the other, at bay. "But I couldn't say what you're driving at."

"Then you must be half-hatched, that's all." Mr. Kingdom took his drink. "What's unemployment mean? It means, if you know your A B C, that there are more men than there are jobs. The law o' Nature, I s'pose you'll want to say? Not a bit of it. The law o' fools, if you like! A nation, my dear feller"—he thumped the bar-counter again—"has got to be run on bis'ness lines the same as a bank or a rag-shop; and it's every man's bis'ness to be doin' somethin' for his livin'—or else down he drags his feller-man. But what's the workin' man done? He don't care a rap; he jest leaves everythin' to chance. What's the result? He goes with a rope always round his neck, and never knows what minnit it's goin' to be pulled tight. There's only so many jobs to go round, and yet he's been and overstocked the country with children he knows he can't keep, and who'll do the same when they grow up; and there you are! If you can show me any gardener who'd let the weeds run till they choked all his good stuff, I'll give in—I'm done!"

"That is so," reflected an attentive listener, judicially. "And yet p'raps the working man isn't altogether to blame."

"Well, confound it, who *is?*" demanded Mr. Kingdom. "He has the fam'ly, don't he? He knows he's chokin' the market and reducin' wages year by year—or he ought to. If he can't think for hisself, some one ought to tap him on the shoulder. Why, bust me, you can't move along any street round here without fallin' over a crowd o' kids that you wouldn't like to pick up, by the look of 'em. Half of 'em'll peg out before long, we know; but what's goin' to become of the other half? There's no work for 'em, unless they pinch some other feller's job at half the price. And *yet,*" he shouted,

his face mottling, "them same kids'll go and have big fam'lies, and keep up the swampin' game. And why should I be taxed to death to pay for it? Why, my Poor Rate's jest double what it was fifteen years back! What'll it be in twenty years' time? If the workin' man o' this country ain't cut his own throat, no one ever did. But he can't see it, not while there's football to talk about. You can't show him how, if he'd limit his little lot to two or three, he'd be able to bring 'em up like human bein's instead o' wild rabbits, and there'd be more chance of a job for 'em later on. That's about the only thing you can't bring against the upper classes—the big bugs; *they* don't do it; they show him where he's a fool to hisself there!"

"Which would you be calling yourself, Mr. Kingdom —a big bug or a working man?" some one had the temerity to ask—perhaps unthinkingly.

"Me?" repeated Mr. Kingdom, his eyes nearly out of their sockets. "Me? Well, mister, so long as I pay my way, and don't ask any one to do it for me, that's no man's question."

"But supposing you came a cropper and couldn't pay it—what then?"

"Aha!" said Mr. Kingdom, not to be drawn so easily on the subject of his private resources. "Another mild-and-bitter here, miss! Any man's liable to come a cropper, my dear feller; but not to take it for granted that other people'll put him on his legs again. That's jest the point. If he couldn't marry without seein' his way clear on a reserve-fund, he's no right to marry. You can't get away from the one wicked fact that the careful people are taxed to pay for the free-and-easy lot. And, mind you, the careful sort have to suffer for it without sayin' anythin'. *They* can't go and sing in the streets, or sell a farthin' boot-lace for a penny, or hop round to a soup-kitchen; they've got to lay low, and keep

smilin', or have all the neighbors pityin' 'em, and the guv'nor sayin': 'Your clothes are a bit frayed, Mister —that won't do for a City office?' Take it from me, you don't see all the real hard luck in the slums; there's a lot of it hidin' behind clean lace-curtains."

"I believe that," agreed the other. The company had given little profound nods generally.

"I should think so," said Mr. Kingdom, subsiding somewhat. "That's my standpoint, any way; and I've lived sixty odd years in London, and seen somethin'. What I've seen is that the careful-goin' feller in this life gets jest make-weight, but that the other sort wants overweight. He'll go on havin' his big fam'lies and swampin' the market and fillin' the Unions; and all he's got to do it on is his twenty-five or thirty bob on Sat'day. What it'll be, sirs, in fifty years' time, if they go on as they're goin'—well, Gawd only knows; I don't."

CHAPTER IX

OH, if you please, mum——"

"Tilly!"

Her cheeks aflame, Tilly drew up. She had burst into the sitting-room with such precipitancy that the cat on her mistress's lap fairly bounced and fell into the fireplace.

"I'm so sorry, mum," she trembled. "I quite forgot myself for the moment—who I was or where I was—really, I did."

"I believe you," said her mistress, who had risen to feel at her heart. "Don't do it again, Tilly, please! I thought something was the matter. Whatever possessed you?" And Tilly bit her lip.

"I'm sorry, mum," she repeated. "It's the first time I've let myself go like that, I think—I mustn't again; I'm a little better than I was, I hope. I'd just had this letter from a friend, and I—I could hardly bear myself."

"Good gracious!" The mistress put on her pince-nez with interest. "Is it bad news?"

"Well, no, mum—it's very good—at least, I hope so. You wouldn't quite understand it, mum, if I told you; but I was going to ask if you'd be so kind as to let me out for an hour—or a little over; and I'd make up for it to-morrow all I could. It's my only friend!"

The mistress, recovered in a measure, sat down again, and glanced up at the clock.

"Ten to nine. H'm!" she said, a trifle thoughtfully. "I think I ought to ask whether it's a male or a female friend, Tilly; don't you?"

"Well, it's both, mum—if you understand me," hesitated Tilly, with a secret chivalrous idea that perhaps she ought not to explain the circumstances too fully. "In any case, I shouldn't take advantage—shouldn't be gone long," she pleaded, vaguely.

"Oh, very well," said the mistress, looking away. "You can go. We had better say ten-fifteen. Of course, I have no wish whatever to probe into your private affairs; only, although I have never seen your mother, I know by instinct that I am only acting as she would do in asking the question."

"I'm sure, mum," murmured Tilly, who was never likely to enlighten her on that point. "But this is quite safe and aboveboard, mum. Thank you so much!"

"Extraordinary!" mused the mistress, as, only two minutes later, she heard Tilly descending from her bedroom again and missing two of the stairs in her hurry. "I think I ought to have looked at that letter."

Clutching it preciously between her teeth, so that she could draw on her indispensable black-cotton gloves as she went along, Tilly was making her way out into Essex Road, Islington—a journey of only a few minutes, at the rate she traveled. Here, after being nearly run down by a butcher's cart, she paused to take her bearings, and showed a policeman the address-corner of her letter.

"Third on the left and first on the right, missie; you'll find it," he said, with the prompt geniality of his kind when fairly approached.

"Thank you so much," said Tilly, darting on. "They're near me—quite near me!" she was repeating to herself, in a sort of suppressed ecstasy. "Third on the left—first on the right! Third on the left. . . ."

And very soon she was looking up at the house—a quiet one in a quiet street, where curtains hung neatly still, and no gramophones seemed to be playing. It

was the first floor, she told herself; because a crimson-shaded light burned up there, and it had just the warm, greeting look that she would have expected. The ground floor looked too dark and ordinary.

"Give two knocks, when you come," the letter had directed; and Tilly gave two—very subdued, semi-sacred ones; but they were heard. Almost at once, watching through the glass door-panels, she saw the slight figure turn the bend of the staircase,—and then the questioning eyes in the tired, wistfully sweet face that she thought so ethereally beautiful.

"You?" startled Alice whispered, as she held back the door. "You, dear? Already?"

"Me!" Tilly threw both arms about her, and gazed up. It happened to be the first time she had seen Alice Richards without a hat; and she was satisfied. "Me! Didn't you know I should come with a rush, whatever happened? Oh, you dear, to take me at my word and come to live here!—you'll never know what I felt! You've got him?—he's here?"

"I've got him," Alice said, with a sob that took her unawares and sounded almost strange.

There was a hugging, and a fevered whispering—and yet another silent caress. The woman downstairs, who had twice opened her kitchen door half an inch to see what sort of callers she might expect, could make nothing of it, and urged her husband to get up from the fireplace and see what he thought. The husband, however, said that they could do what they liked in the hall as long as they did it quietly and paid their rent. Thereupon the lady remarked that all men thought of was money—money—money.

"How does he seem?" asked Tilly timidly, at the foot of the stairs. "You didn't look for me so soon. If you think it might excite him in the least, I would much rather walk up and down outside——"

"Bring her up!" the answer came in Victor Richards' own deep, quizzical voice, from over the balustrade. "I can see her; bring her up!" And up they went, trying to laugh, and urging each other on. "There!" he said, gripping Tilly's hand so tightly that, either because of the grip or her rush of sensations, she could have burst into tears. "There! What do you think of my home? What do you think of my wife, who has made it for me in four days?"

"——and nights!" was on the tip of Tilly's tongue. She checked it in time. "Beautiful," she cried, gazing round. "Beautiful, of course! You're not to ask me what I think of her, Mr. Richards; she's yours—that's enough!"

"Sit down," he said, quietly, proudly. He had got over his own surprise at the outward change—which was a small thing when set against the deeper thoughts behind all. He seemed quite at home and unconstrained, in his slippers and gray smoking-jacket. "Sit just here!" And Alice motioned her to obey. "Yes; I was simply ushered into a cab last night and whisked away from that place into this little paradise. And I'm never going to leave it, am I, dear heart? We know it this time, don't we? We're not going to worry in the least, are we?"

He put back his head to look up at her, as she stood behind him, her arms upon his shoulder lovingly. And Alice's hands twined about his face, and held it against her breast, so that he should not see how her throat worked—how flooded were her eyes. Tilly's own heart thumped so fast that she hardly knew how to remain still. To her, such happiness seemed almost Eden-like, almost dangerous, and certainly beyond her own reach. . . . And then she thought of something else, and made up her mind on the spot to earn an extra ten shillings quickly somehow, and send it to Alice anonymously.

"What do you think of her, Tilly?—as I'm going to call you from now?" he laughed, stroking and caressing the head drooped above his own. "She says I'm to sit here like this for at least six months, and not to dream of getting a berth of any kind. She's going to stitch and stitch and stitch, and keep us both. That's what she says!"

"That's what she means; and she's quite right," said Tilly, instantly. And he stared.

"But do you think that, as a man, I could let her work her poor fingers away for me like that? If I'm better ——"

"There's no 'if' about it, Mr. Richards: you are," said Tilly, just as straightly. "But what she says is right, is right; and there's no other way."

And he became quiet; and Alice thanked Tilly with a look.

The little fire burned richly and redly, the little clock ticked comfortably, and Victor talked and smoked his pipe and looked like a contented king in a palace—save now and again, when his eyes veered to watch Alice moving about the room, and he held his breath as in awe or incredulity that could never be expressed. Tilly's span of minutes ticked away fast.

"Alice!" Victor Richards whispered, when at length Tilly came to herself, looked at the clock, and rose quickly.

"Ah, yes!" said Alice, smiling and bringing her hands together. It seemed to Tilly that these two had no need to speak at all—a look from one to the other was enough —they were married lovers. She wished her mother could come here for an hour, and just grasp what Alice Richards had meant by saying that all real happiness comes from within.

Alice poured something from a tiny decanter with a

green ribbon tied in a bow about its neck, and brought to Tilly a little brimming glass.

"Before you go, dear—your love to both of us, and ours to you!" she said, softly. "Victor mustn't have any; but he knows—I've told him all about the little public-house in the rain, Tilly!"

"Oh!" cried Tilly, peony-cheeked with pleasure. "Fancy your doing this—remembering that!"

"I told her never to forget it," said Victor Richards, warmly. "She's my wife, and you took care of her; and I said: 'Have a drop of welcome all ready for our Tilly when she comes.' What do you wish us?"

"To be—to be together always as you are to-night," said Tilly, with doubtful steadiness.

"Amen," said Victor Richards, as he took up his pipe. "Come again! We shall listen for the two knocks, and know it's you—there is no one else to come now."

"Oh, I don't want to go—I don't want to go!" said Tilly, clinging on at the foot of the stairs. "I shall be miserable! I feel I could be a different girl, if I was always here with you! I shouldn't want any money!"

"But you *are* a different girl, Tilly," Alice reminded her, looking deeply down into her eyes. "You are trying your hardest day by day to be a good, brave, helpful woman; and more than that you could not do. Don't tell me!—I've thought about you—I know—it's not all lost!"

"Yes, I do try and try," quivered Tilly. "All but once or twice I've said that 'Count your blessings!' to myself, as you said, when I feel like giving up and throwing something at some one. But it's made me feel so alone in the world—and so miserable when I go home and see what things are drifting to there. I can't help 'em, although I talk to 'em as if I can; you don't know how I feel when I come away, as if I'm leaving 'em to it."

"Perhaps I do, dear," Alice just whispered, to the

annoyance of the watchful and listening party downstairs. "I won't tell you that, because you trust, everything is bound to come out all right in the end; but I do tell you, as I tell myself, to go on trusting. Why, dear, no loneliness could have been deeper than mine; and I should have died, but for the belief that a Hand was stretched out to me. And now——"

Tilly looked away at the wall.

"Ah, to have some one to love, and to look after, even on a few shillings a week—I wouldn't want anything more than that in my life," she said, the maternity-longings swelling in her breast and sounding in her voice quite unmistakably. "Some one to love and mind! If it's wrong to say it—think of it—God knows it's true, and I can't help it!"

"'Sh!" breathed Alice, soothingly. "It's true of every woman, I hope, Tilly; and that's where her bravery often lies—in fighting it back, if need be, and keeping her silence. Why, you know, Tilly, the woman who smiles most is often the saddest at heart. Don't worry, dear; don't brood on the thought that you have so much love to offer, and that no man wants it. Look at the years and years you have before you!" And Tilly forced a smile.

"It isn't that," she said. "I'm only twenty-two; but I made up my mind long ago that I'm never to have a little home of my own—not in that way. Of course, I'm nothing much to look at; and that's a lot—or seems so. I—I got to care for one young fellow—more than he knows, or ever shall know; but he played about with me for years, and then went off to sea without a word. What would you do, if—if you suddenly met him face to face again, and he tried to pick up with you afresh as if nothing had happened?"

"I mustn't say, dear," she urged, after a moment's thought. "I ought not to judge between you. I only

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know that, if a man is bad or selfish, it's a terrible thing for a woman to hope that her love will change him—afterwards."

"Afterwards!—yes, that's the word—that's just what I always try to tell myself," said Tilly, with a quick breath. "It's in me, I suppose, to want to have some one to look after, and stand up for—something of my own flesh and blood to *work* for, I mean; but I've never let myself down to any one by saying so—nobody but you; because you stand and think when I tell you anything, and you seem to *know,* before you're told. Good-bye!"

"Good-night, dear!" corrected Alice, cheerfully. "The very best thought you can ever have is that you have *tried,* even if you seemed to fail; the world will be just a little bit better for having known Tilly Westaway!"

"Does—does he know that you had to give up all your dressmaking work, to come here?" Tilly paused to breathe, practical in the last moment at the door. "Does he seem to know that you've got to work your way all afresh here, and to feel worried about how the money is coming in?"

"I don't mean him to know—not if I can help it," Alice told her, looking up the misty street with a fine air of optimism. "Men don't go very deep into that—not, I mean, if you know how to hide little things from them. Make everything *look* smooth, and they think what a wonderful contriver you are. I'm quite a magician, you know—for his sake—which means my own!" She darted a last quick kiss at Tilly's forehead. "We shall manage splendidly somehow, dear—you're not to worry!"

Tilly found her way back to Essex Road somehow without inquiry, and covered the remainder of the distance at a breathless speed.

"Just twenty minutes behindhand!" called her mistress from the head of the stair, where she had been

hovering anxiously for some time with the cat in her arms. "I don't say you——"

"I know, mum; and I know it's no use saying I'm sorry, but I am," panted Tilly, before she could get any farther. "I'll slip into it to-morrow, if there's anything got behind—although I don't fancy there is. What about the supper, mum? I've got my things off—I'm all ready."

"Oh, we have had supper, and cleared away. You seem very much out of breath, Tilly. Did you—er—enjoy your run?" she felt bound to inquire, pointedly.

"Oh, did I, mum!" responded Tilly, in a glow of grateful enthusiasm. "It was like heaven!"

"Really?" came down, a little stiffly. But Tilly had bustled into her kitchen quite innocently. "I think there's another letter for you," ended the mistress, in the tone of one who knew there was.

"Oh, thank you, mum—thank you!"

Tilly had already found it, and was gazing with genuine wonder at the unknown, very thick, copy-book style of handwriting on the envelope.

"Whoever in the world——?" She gave a sudden gasp. "It's Bob Kingdom!"

Tittering with delight at her own intuition—feeling twice her real size at the mere thought of having two postal communications in one day when the mistress had had none—she tucked the letter inside her bodice; well within the corset, in fact, to make sure of it. It was quite warm when, half an hour later, she put down her candlestick, closed the door extra carefully, sat down on the edge of the bed, and opened her letter with the air of one dealing in official secret despatches.

"Bob Kingdom—yes!" She had glanced with quick courage at the end. "Four pages! How good of him—how thoughtful! I wish it wasn't quite such large writing, though."

She shifted the candle two or three times, and settled herself down. This little bit of voluntary suspense was quite justified by the novelty of the circumstances. The only other man of her inmost thoughts—Bert Lovell—had never committed himself to paper. He could dash off love-letters by the bushel, he had said, if he felt like it; so apparently he had never felt like it.

The address and the date had conceivably occupied Bob Kingdom as long as all the rest of the letter; they were well-nigh flawless, with a thickness and shading added to the down-strokes afterwards, and little curls given to the capitals. Then it began:—

"Dear Miss——"

"Good gracious," thought Tilly aloud. "Any one 'ud think he was afraid o' me 'breaching' him in the newspapers. Might be Miss Anyone."

"Am now taking up my pen as we mentioned one with the other. Things seem much about the same. Not so wet as it might have been here, taking it all round; suppose much the same where you are. Some fog about now. Things rather slacker than usual——"

"Good gracious," breathed Tilly again. "That's taken up all one page. He *is* a one!"

"—than usual in my direction for time of year, there being no frosts to touch the pipes to speak of. Thought of you when I went up the Row the other evening——"

"Well, that's a little better," murmured the reader. She was spelling it out hopefully, economically. "He may find himself in a minute."

"——the other evening. Fancy I saw your young brother—not the one at the Overflow place. Rather fancy he was up to no good behind the stalls, but didn't make myself known to him. Suppose a pair of my boots would be no use to him at a pinch——"

Tilly wiped her eyes with the edge of the counterpane, and went on reading as through a mist.

"——at a pinch. I might be passing down your way some time or other—can't say when—just to see what things look like. See you're only about eight miles off Barnet where you are. Like a Christmas card? Soon be here now. See they're all out in the shop-windows. Can't believe another year's gone. Might be catching sight of you some evening, if you have your day out and happen to be up this way. I'm supposed to call at my club about seven and leave about ten; generally keep to that. Expect you feel a bit lonely now and then where you are, with nothing going on. Think this must be all for the present. Not much winter yet, but a lot of illness about this damp weather, I'm told; should keep your window open at night and eat plenty of apples, with a Spanish onion baked or boiled now and then. Best love to all. Might be writing again with more news soon. Yours, R. Kingdom."

Tilly dropped her hands and sat looking into space for a while. Then, maybe acting upon the time-honored belief that there is invariably something to be read "between the lines," she went through the letter twice again.

"'Yours, R. Kingdom!'" she ended to herself in a whisper. "And, if I wrote back, I should have to say: 'Yours, T. Westaway' . . . And yet we're nothing at all in the world to do with each other. P'raps I might never even see him again."

More thinking. Then, with a sudden air of determination, Tilly got up, listened, and drew from under the looking-glass her own penny packet of stationery—purchased very proudly three months ago, and still far from exhausted. Down she knelt and smoothed a sheet of paper out on the washstand. There was no ink available, but a morsel of lead pencil, moistened frequently with her tongue, served nearly as well. There and then, in the helpful silence of midnight, she began upon

her return-letter to Bob Kingdom—not to astonish him, but because she felt she must.

"Dear Mr. K——"

She felt that this matched his own restrained style of commencement nicely. The rest was a series of impulsive bursts all her own—prompted, it seemed, by some waiting whisperer within herself. There was no labored effort about the reply. Tilly wrote rapidly, if not evenly, and was not ashamed of any small uncertainties in the spelling. Her idea of a letter was, to say all one could think of—never mind how it parsed; people could put in the stops for themselves, according to taste.

"Dear Mr. K——,

"I'm sitting down to answer back on the very spot, because I think it so wonderful of you to keep your word passed in joke that night, and I know I shouldn't sleep now till I've done it. Dear Mr. Kingdom, perhaps you didn't quite say all you might have done, but as long as I don't feel forward in reply, I don't mind a bit. Except that when you write again, never mind about the weather and that, which is just the same here, by what you say; although I never have time to notice what the weather is like, being over a hot stove one minute and out in the garden sifting cinders the next. What I mean is, I'd rather hear about yourself, or anything like that, and what the old streets look like as you walk along them, or how your dear old mother keeps in her health lately. She doesn't know me much to speak of, but I know her, and like to think she's there still. I think it's wonderful a little mite of a lady like that having a great son like you; but I feel sure you look after her, in a quiet way.

"Dear Mr. Kingdom, I hardly like to go on. Seems like imposing on good nature; but you know what it is to be tied up here and keep on feeling as if I want to

break out of a barbed cage, because everything goes so smooth here day in and day out that it hardly seems like living at all—at least, my mother wouldn't think so. Don't think I'm going to talk about my mother, except to say I think she *might* find a minute to write to me. But, no, never a line. Any one would think I'd gone to China and was given up as lost in the savages' hands. Perhaps it's only me, though, that feels like that. I suppose I get it from father, although he never said much about what he felt. Perhaps he thought it was no use.

"Dear Mr. Kingdom, now you can guess it's my father I'm always thinking about. Jimmy's safe at least, where he is, till his time comes and takes him, and Giddy I can't bring myself to think of like a sister, although I've tried since I've been here; while as for mother—well, she can't help it, but she gets what she asks for, and one of these days may get a bit over; you never know, although I hope not, for her sake. But I feel about father that I'm letting all his life go by and not letting him know what I think of him. I want to tell you that he *never* drinks; he couldn't, if he wanted, because of his chest and indigestion. And to think of him coming home to that bread-and-dripping, while I have more than I can eat here — sometimes fried vegetables for breakfast, if they're left over upstairs. I can't tell you off-hand where you might come across him, if you wanted to when you're out walking; but you know the house, if you *do,* and perhaps mother wouldn't be there just at the moment. What I mean is, he's giving way, for want of work and hope. And when I finished your kind letter, I thought the kindest answer you could make to this one would be to let him know if you heard of any job going, even if it's only eight shillings a week. I send home two out of my five-and-nine, after buying my clothes and all other extras; but does he get it, I ask myself?—any of it, I mean. Does he know what

I feel, but that sometimes I haven't even a penny stamp left on me?

"I did mean to read this all through again, but perhaps I'd better not, for fear I might tear it up. I've written on two sheets of paper without any criss-cross, so that you'll be able to read it easy. If you could only just keep that in your head about him, and when I tell you that he's not a man who could cry and get over it like some could, but takes it to heart and looks so strange when he sits there by himself, you'll have some idea. If I thought he was to starve, with all those public-houses about coining money—well, you might think the worse of me, so I won't say more.

"It's just gone one by the downstairs clock. I might as well go on writing till daylight, for I've done myself for sleep now; but you'll have had quite enough of it. Never mind; read it in bits.

"You spoke about when I come over. Goodness knows. I feel like coming now. But you don't belong to yourself when you're out in service. But, whatever I do afterwards, as no one else goes, I must go first of all to see Jimmy where he is. I've looked at it all ways, and it seems I ought to, the little time he may have left, by the look of him. If the others don't trouble, I must; I suppose I'm a funny one again, but I can't help it. Anyway, I should spare all the time I could to run in and see father; you may be sure of that. Whether he wants to see me, is another thing.

"Well, it's morning now, or else I'd say 'good-night.' I leave it to you whether I should be glad to hear from you again or not. I may as well keep on hoping for the best, even if I feel as if I'm glued here, with four blank walls all round me. Shows what Jimmy must feel now and then. Love to all.

Yours,

TILLY WESTAWAY.

"P. S.—While I think of it. They don't have many apples here, and the mistress doesn't like the smell of onions any more than the mention of them; so I couldn't very well touch on it. But I've opened the window top and bottom a little. Which way does yours look? Ours looks east, missis says. By the feel of it, I should say it's north, every bit. Don't forget father. Good-bye for a little. 'Count your blessings,' as a friend of mine's got me in the way of doing. They're there, she says, even if you can't see them at a glance. And if she says so, we may be pretty sure there's something in it."

CHAPTER X

GRAY day after gray day filed by—tediously, perhaps, but none the less surely—until the slack end of that year's long chain seemed well within sight. There was as yet no sparkle of frost, no snow-muffled landscape, no glittering night skies, no mystical glamour—all of which, indeed, seemed to belong exclusively to the past; nevertheless, the magic spirit of Christmas, breathed out from within, had filled the air, and made a good substitute.

People seemed to laugh more, and to walk a little more briskly and expectantly—or so Tilly thought, when now and then she craned her neck for a glimpse from the semi-underground breakfast-parlor. The Guild of the Brave Poor Things, next door but one, were, so the mistress said, working steadily on in their cheerful invisibility, and piling up stacks of small woolen undergarments for distribution among the unclothed and unwanted down the obscure streets. The mistress herself, fired by the same spirit of "up and doing," and desiring to communicate it to Tilly, was having the house cleaned down and sweetened from top to bottom—unnecessary as it seemed to Tilly, whose knees were sore with the perpetual scrubbing-attitude.

"Of course, I used to have a charwoman to help with all the rougher work, Tilly," the mistress observed; "but they never do the thing thoroughly—not as you or I would do it. The corners mustn't be inspected, and water is left to soak through the linoleum, and they

expect to sit down and drink beer and gossip half-way through the morning, and always have a nasty headache about three in the afternoon; and then, even although one pays them well, they nearly always say: 'I suppose you haven't got such a thing as an old skirt, or a jacket, or combinations, that you've done with, mum? I don't know whenever I shall be able to buy one?' But they don't mean anything really 'old' or 'done with'—oh, no! And I find that they say the same thing at every house, and then sell the garments to a wardrobe dealer —which I call very mean. That class of people I never can understand. They're not thorough in anything. They're only waiting all day for the moment to 'knock off,' as they call it."

"Well, come to that, I s'pose it's natural, mum, in a way," ventured Tilly, who at times felt herself to be a little too thorough. "They seem to rub through the world just as well as the triers, I mean, in the long run. They feel they might as well rust out as wear out, I s'pose. I know I've heard 'em say they can't be expected to go and take a fire-engine interest in other people's dirty work; and moreover they're not going to."

"Indeed!" said the mistress, bridling—and busily engaged at the moment in silk-working a "table-center" for the forthcoming church bazaar in aid of the Purity Crusade. "The great thing, Tilly, is that they are *paid* to take an interest; and that morally therefore it amounts to swindling."

Tilly, polishing a square of linoleum into a slippery surface, sat back, glad of a chance to relieve the strain on her corset.

"Funny thing how the hair will get in my eyes, however I pin it up," she remarked. "Well, I s'pose it's like this, mum: them sort of people feel there's nothing much worth troubling over in this world, so they'll wait for the next, and see how that turns out. I know a lot

of 'em—at least, I used to; and I can say this much for 'em——"

"Get on, Tilly!" softly directed the mistress. "We shall never get done."

Tilly "got on," but was determined to deliver her opinion, now that it had been invoked.

"What I mean to say is, mum, that you can't really say what's what till you've been right behind the scenes, so to speak. Most of 'em have got their own bit o' work to get through as well, you see; they can't put it out very well; that wouldn't pay. As likely as not the husband comes home snappy and half-addled, and they've got to turn to and do their own washing till after bed-time; and the copper won't boil, and the clothes-line breaks in the middle; and so on and so forth; and what with one thing and another, you can't really marvel if they seem a bit limp and go-easy next day—after being up at five, p'raps, to get the husband safe off to his job. Some of 'em feel a bit worried into the bargain—p'raps they've locked their baby with one a little older in one room, and keep wondering all day where they left the matches, and whether the older one's drunk the baby's milk or hit it over the head to keep it quiet. I'm sure, *I* don't wonder," she said, almost recklessly, as she plunged her arms to and fro. "Things are parceled out so different for some to what they are for others, and you go down with a wallop and take to drink to drown everything; I've seen so much of it even in my little time. It wants a downright genius to see things cheerful, I must say, mum, if you only knew what I know. And if they want their beer in the morning, I s'pose it's to save 'em having to buy it themselves."

"Oh, little doubt," agreed the mistress, still stiffly, "I can make some allowance, Tilly; you *do* seem to know a good deal about it, I will say. But I must main-

tain that that class of person takes advantage, and so loses the sympathy that——"

Tilly sat bolt upright, with a little involuntary titter.

"Well, mum—do excuse me—sympathy's no mortal good to *them*. They want something to eat and drink—something they can lay hold of; that's just it. It's what I've heard father say over and over again: the Bible woman goes the round every day with all manner o' sympathy; but when she's gone, there's nothing left behind. If they can't meet their rent, they get thrown out or locked up; and when they're found sleeping out under an arch, they get locked up just the same—unless they can prove they're camping-out, as the saying is. So what *are* they to do? If you ask me anything——"

"Don't be too demonstrative, Tilly," the mistress thought it advisable to interrupt, with a wave of her hand toward the work. "If you really come from that atmosphere, I'm very glad to think you're out of it, and doing your best to rise above it. I think you know quite well what I meant. The beer itself is nothing—except that it's a very poor cure for trouble, and seems to me to be an excuse, or a habit. I abominate beer—in that sense. Why, when was it?—in September, when we had the workmen here—yes! I felt thoroughly annoyed; more than annoyed; I felt inclined to speak to the foreman—till I found he was the same as the men."

Tilly knew what was coming here, and laughed consumedly to herself as she bent and swept the polishing-cloth this way and that. Quite a touch of color had mantled in the mistress's composed features; she was frigidly impressive.

"Imagine it! I have not forgotten; the same men will not come here again. Yes; one of them marched up to the back door and asked for a glass of water. Of course, I gave it to him willingly—and happened to turn round again in time to see him deliberately throw

it away. 'Did you mean *beer?*' I asked him, determined to know. 'Well, I prefer it, ma'am, as you put the question like that,' he had the coolness to say. Well, I gave him the beer,—your master's bottled ale—and said no more. What happened? Precisely at the same moment next day, the whole lot of them came and stood in a row there waiting—in fact, I'm not sure to this day whether some of them were not strange workmen come in from the next building. I simply looked at them, until they turned and went off. What they said among themselves, I shouldn't care to know, perhaps."

"Oh, well, mum, after all said and done, it's what they call human nature," commented Tilly, pacifically, yet spiritedly. "Poor things! You think!—up at five after a glass or two too much, p'raps, and mixing mortar and muck all day, and smacking on brick after brick in the rain or hot sun, and baked one minute and soaked through the next, and getting clouds o' dust and lime down your throat—and then p'raps being told you won't be wanted on the job after Sat'day! I know something about *that,* mum, if nothing else. That's where I s'pose I'm different, mum; I shouldn't look at it like that, at all. 'Give 'em their beer, and let 'em enjoy it, if they like it,' I say to myself; 'so long as they don't go and make beasts of themselves,'—and they don't *all* do that. What I should think to myself is, mum, if I had a house o' my own—which I'm never likely to have in this life—wouldn't it pay me to make the workmen feel at home, like, and do their best on the job? For they've got little ways of their own to show what they think about it, I can assure you, mum. Many a party's wondered why loose half bricks come rattling down their chimbleys afterwards, or why the ladders fall right across the flower-beds every time, or what not. No; I don't fancy you'll ever find a pint o' beer's wasted in that

way. It's what they call spoiling the ship for a ha'porth o' tar, isn't it?"

"You appear to know all about it, Tilly," was the lofty response. "I'm sure I don't wish to go any deeper into the matter. I look upon a man as a man, and not as an animal to be coaxed and wriggled into doing what he's paid to do. I expect, if the truth's known, Tilly, it was you who led them to look for a cup of tea regularly every afternoon, too."

"Well, yes, mum, p'raps it was me," admitted Tilly. "I made them one, when you happened to be out—but it was out of my own kitchen allowance. They looked so thirsty; and men like that won't take on with bare water, do what you will. I told 'em they'd have to come to you the next day, mum, if they wanted any; and I s'pose they did."

"Yes," said "mum," very decisively; "but they got nothing, because of their pronounced rudeness."

"What was that, mum?" queried Tilly. "Was I there on the spot?"

"No; you were upstairs, if I recollect aright; and I happened to go down to the kitchen—as they hoped and calculated, little doubt. I shall not forget it in a hurry. One of them came deliberately to the window—it was only about half-past three—looked in, and shouted out at the top of his rude voice: 'No, Bill; the kettle isn't on yet!' Just imagine!"

"Oh, well, mum, after all, such is life," urged Tilly, as she straightened her back and got her breath to begin upon the next unpolished square. "It's no use kicking against the pricks, they do say, don't they?—whatever it means; I'm sure I don't know."

Still, although the immediate outlook was drab and indefinite, there were bright spots here and there. The house-cleaning process was nearly over, and seven days more would bring actual Christmas—*must* bring it,

Tilly, who had a vivid streak of imagination somewhere in her composition, had not only begun to share the prevailing seasonable anticipation, but to think that, after all the waiting, something quite out of the common must be due to happen. She cherished the bit of mystery. The "waits" played at night, and kept her willingly awake and in a vague thrill. She pictured some wonderful holy radiance stealing up over the edge of the world and flooding all London. She cried beneath the bedclothes for a long time, when a woman with a clear voice came right outside the house and broke the silence with "Annie Laurie"—the most sweet and heart-breaking song, Tilly thought, that could ever have been written; she resolved to buy it, and to sing no other. Her previous haunting favorite, "My sweetheart when a boy," became only a sad memory.

Moreover, the mistress had quite made her heart "turn over" with a piece of news.

"While you've worked so well, Tilly," she said, "I've been thinking. I am going to give you an extra ten shillings as a little Christmas-box; and no doubt whatever your master will tell me to make it twelve-and-six. We like to encourage you, you see."

"Oh, thank you, mum!" choked Tilly, rising from the stove with a sooty red face. "Oh, that's what I call a windfall, mum; I never expected it, or looked for it. Could I—might I have it just a little beforehand, if you could spare it?"

"Beforehand? But that wouldn't seem like a real Christmas-box, Tilly——"

"Oh, yes, it would, mum," Tilly assured her, very convincingly. "I wouldn't have spoken of it, mum, because I couldn't; but I'd set my heart on a few little presents, like—this being my first year out, so to speak; and the utmost I could put by was fivepence, which wouldn't have gone any way. I did want to surprise

'em all at home, I mean, with a knock and a few little parcels done up on Christmas Eve——"

There she stopped, her heart "turning over" again.

"Christmas Eve!" repeated the mistress, adjusting her pince-nez for a stare. "Well, that's one way of telling me that you wanted an extra day out, Tilly, I must say. You said nothing of this till now."

"That's a fact, mum," owned Tilly, looking away. "I didn't like to. I'd almost given up the idea, I mean, with only fivepence and my bus fare in hand, as you might say. But I had hoped, all the same!"

"Dear me," said the mistress, forced to make mental calculations. "I'm rather afraid it will be awkward, Tilly; I wish I had known. Let me see: I have to be at the church three nights, and with so much to be done at home in the way of preparation. . . . Well, now, Tilly, this is all I can see for it. Your regular day out comes on Tuesday, and Christmas Eve is on Friday—you see for yourself how I'm placed. If you really wish to go home on *Friday* evening, you must absolutely manage to be 'in' at seven o'clock on *Tuesday,* instead of the usual nine-thirty. Do you understand?"

"Very well, mum," murmured Tilly. "If that's the case, I'll be in to the minute. Anything to give 'em a little surprise Christmas Eve—it feels so much different all round. Of course, you'll be wanting me all through the Christmas, mum?—I needn't ask."

"Oh, yes, all through Christmas," confirmed the mistress, gravely. "I should have preferred to go out somewhere myself, for a change; but your master thinks otherwise, and likes his friends to come here, and so I have to sink my own feelings in the matter. I shall endeavor to make it up to you, though, Tilly."

The following day was Sunday. Between early tea and seven p. m.—when she was expected to go to church, but preferred the homely little mission hall near by,

where she felt less like a sparrow among a crowd of canaries—Tilly contrived to scribble two letters of fairly respectable length and coherence. One was to Bob Kingdom, and ran:—

"DEAR MR. K—,—Feeling a little bit down at not hearing from you again, as to father and work, etc.; but hope for the best. Have had my hands too full up till now to think of any one or anything. Still never a line from home, to say how they are going on, and whether they're going to try and make things a bit Christmassy for once. Ah, well! Feel somehow as if I've come to look to you for any news now. This is only just to say that my day out is Tuesday, and I've got to be in again at seven sharp—quite cut me for the minute when I heard it, as I've worked so hard. Have a little call on a friend to make first, then some shopping, then straight on to Jimmy at 4 o'clock—must do it, as I wrote and told him I was coming, and he might fret, it being the time of year it is. I might cut back through the alleys and be somewhere near your shop for five minutes at six o'clock—no later. Very likely you might be coming home or going out at the minute, and could just say anything you wanted—about father, etc., I mean. Yours with a rush, and my head all anyhow, T. WESTAWAY.

"P. S.—Ought to be three full-grown servants here, seems to me. Can hardly bend with my stiffness, now a quiet day has come round. Ah, well! Brighter times on the way!"

The other was addressed to Alice Richards at Wickham Terrace, off the Essex Road; and Tilly sank unconsciously into a somewhat different key.

"PRECIOUS,—My ears burn so, I know you've been

expecting a line in answer to yours. How are you Alice, dear, and how is *he* keeping? I do tremble about it at times; but what with one thing and another to think of, and no time to do it except at night, I hardly know where I am or what I'm doing. But I never forget either of you, dear, although I can't get to you. I've only got to shut my eyes as I'm scurrying about the place, and I can see the beautiful little room again—so quiet!—and you hard at work over your machine, and your husband sitting there by the fire with his pipe. Bless you both, dear. I've been so happy to know all has gone well so far, and that he won't go back to that place again, at any rate. You're quite right to get him out in the air all you can, dear. A friend of mine—that Mr. R. Kingdom, whom I've not heard from again, and can't quite make it out—thinks that fresh air and apples and onions cure nearly everything. Count your blessings, eh? I've got one at least coming Tuesday—and another ditto Friday evening. Will tell you all when I knock twice on Tuesday morning—at about twelve o'clock. (Mistress seems to think my day out doesn't begin till twelve. Funny idea, isn't it?) Don't work too hard, dear. Make the ladies wait, as other dressmakers do. Your husband is the only one to think of. Afraid I should have to tell them so, downright. Till then, Your loving TILLY."

Tilly's ears tingled in reality, indeed, and her blood acted very strangely altogether, just as she put the second envelope-flap to her tongue. She had heard, coming as from a distant dreamland, a soft, cooing, seductive little series of trills—like those of a bird calling to its mate in the deep thicket. It was followed by the tentative twittering, and then stopped. For a moment, not intuitive enough to know whether her sick sensation stood for love, *longing, or loathing*, Tilly stood breathlessly

still where she had risen. If it was joy, it was very strange and fearful joy.

Oh, he had not gone out of her life! He had found her—he had found her! To "find" her was a simple thing, even to one of Bert Lovell's non-pushing temperament; but at the moment it could not strike Tilly in that way. He had worked his way across London to her. She seemed to sweep a searchlight into her own heart, to find whether he was still enshrined there. To Tilly, with her suppressed longings to be loved and wanted, it seemed momentarily a wonderful, fateful thing that he had gone to this trouble—that the initiative had come from him unasked. He was here!

The melodious little series of whistlings broke out afresh. Tilly grasped at a chair, and felt faint with uncertainty. Then, as the sounds died, and the realization of her position returned, she blew out her candle, rushed to the window, drew back the curtain, and stared down into the roadway. There was a baffling haze over all externals; she rubbed the glass vehemently, to clear it of her breath, but still could not be sure whether she was waving frantically away a purely imaginary figure down there. . . . This was the second time the dream-like illusion possessed her. Was she going like *Jimmy?*

She crept hastily downstairs—only wishing that the master had not gone out, and that the buzz of their talk in the drawing-room could deaden all outer sounds. The breakfast-parlor, fronting the roadway, was in darkness; she tiptoed in there, and stood to listen. She felt almost like a criminal at bay. And presently, sure enough, the trills commenced afresh. In desperation Tilly dived to the area door and up the short flight of steps; and a figure strolled across from the opposite pavement in response. It was Bert—Bert in the flesh right enough this time.

"Go away!" Tilly warned, in a half strangled voice. "You know what I told you. Go away!"

She dived back again, and put the weight of her body against the lower door—not at all certain what Bert Lovell's unrestrained impulses might lead him to do next. Another minute of suspense passed; and then suddenly, just as she began to hope, there was a quick movement across the floor overhead, and her mistress's voice came down, subdued but penetrative.

"Tilly! Where are you? Come here!—I want you!"

CHAPTER XI

TILLY, who never thought of disobeying, or of being astutely deaf, mounted the stair slowly, and halted like a prisoner "docked" for trial, with her hot hands clasped loosely before her.

"H'm," said the mistress, after a silent puzzled scrutiny. "Do you mind speaking, Tilly? What had you to feel ashamed of, or afraid of?"

Tilly swayed a little, and moistened her lips; but could think of nothing suitable to say. The mistress, maybe pricked by the thought that she had been kept successfully in the dark till now, pointed sharply back toward the drawing-room window.

"Who *is* that—out there? What is the meaning of it?"

"I'm sure I don't know what he's after in the least, mum," Tilly got out. And the mistress stepped back, stiffening visibly.

"What? Tilly, I don't like that. That hurts me! If you can say that to my face, I shall never feel safe with you again; I would not have you in the house for worlds. Why, you went out and said something to him; I have been watching and wondering for several minutes. Stealth of that sort I won't tolerate. Look at me!—Who is that person?"

And Tilly, after an heroic inward effort to stand her ground and disavow all complicity, was beaten.

"It's—it's my young man," she said, tremblingly.

"Thank you! Thank you!" The mistress said it twice, with a depth which she hoped would carry full

and enduring weight. "I was quite determined to know, Tilly, if only because the underhand look of it struck me as very singular, and I am not altogether anxious to have the neighbors thinking the same. To stand outside here, whistling like that, on a Sunday evening——! Don't think it a rude question, Tilly; but how long might you have known him?"

"Some—some years," said dry-lipped Tilly, in spite of herself still. "Several years—I can't quite say how many."

"Good gracious!" The mistress, genuinely struck, looked her up and down. "Well, there is no harm whatever in that—no reason why you should appear so guilty. What a strange girl you are of a sudden, Tilly! Why didn't you confide in me from the outset? I'm sure I spoke in a motherly, well-meaning way, as I have done with all my maids; no need whatever to throw dust in my eyes, and as if it were wicked to think of a man. If you knew your world as I do, Tilly, you would avoid all secrecy where a man is concerned. Does your mother know him, I wonder?"

"Yes, mum—oh, yes!" said Tilly desperately. She was not quite sure on the point, but to explain all seemed hopeless, even if she had felt equal to the attempt.

"Dear me!" The mistress lifted her skirts, swept back across to the window, and half-tilted a lath of the Venetian blind. If sympathetic with a homely touch of romance, she was not disposed to show it too openly. "Yes, he's there still, on the opposite pavement," Tilly heard. "He looks respectable enough, as far as I can judge. I do wish you had been frank with me! Have I seemed so hard? I'm sure, I should not have minded his knocking at the lower door in the ordinary way, and asking——"

"He wouldn't do that, mum," put in Tilly, in her own defense. "And I shouldn't think of it myself."

"In other words, you thought I should object, and so kept it from me," said the mistress, turning with hushed reproof. "Just to show you how wrong you were, and how much I prefer you to be open and aboveboard in every respect—particularly in that respect—you can put on your things at once, Tilly, and accompany your young man for a walk; never mind about church for this once. And do, pray, give him to understand that this open-street method of attracting your attention might be improved upon. We are not living in Spain—or in Stepney. You can go!"

She partly closed the door. A gasp had risen in Tilly's throat, but it did not become audible. She stood a moment, and then turned and went mechanically up the stairs, as with a sense of having left it too late to speak out—even if she had wished to do so. In a minute more she came down, all ready. It was significant of her state of mind that she went out by the hall door, like a visitor, instead of by the lower, like a nobody in particular.

Still, she preserved a hazy knowledge that the mistress would be watching very intently, and that she must sustain the part up to a certain point, and think it over afterwards. She crossed the road without noticeable hesitation.

"Hullo!" said Bert, as if he had confidently expected her. "That's good; something like!"

"Come on!" Tilly breathed, almost threateningly.

The mistress had not much chance to gauge the inner depth of the affair. With just a bantering, comprehensive little laugh, Bert complied; and after a few paces they became indistinct in the December haze.

"Bravo, old girl!" At the first corner, by the pillar-box, Bert flung his arm around her neck and drew up her face. "At last! Give us a kiss for waiting! Thought you might be showing me your teeth instead, I did."

"Let go," panted Tilly, pushing with all her might, although her heart bounded suffocatingly. "Let go!—Keep away!—I don't want your kisses!"

"Rats!" said Bert, smiling coolly into her eyes. What any stray passers-by thought—there were not many, in these still, spacious, tree-lined thoroughfares—was evidently nothing to him, so long as he had the strength and the ability to get his way. "Rats!—you silly little silly! You've got to have them, whether you want them or not. Like it?" Holding her tightly, he drew his lips along her forehead, and then over her mouth, laughing as the mouth tried to open for a cry. "Velvet, old girl—velvet! What's the use of your pretending you can carry on without it? Told you I should find you out, when I wanted to; told you you were booked for life!"

Tilly at last fought free—all but to the extent of one arm, which he was shrewd enough to keep grasped.

"What do you mean?" she cried. "What do you mean by coming there and trying to make me lose my situation?"

"I'll get you another," Bert said, promptly. "Ain't I good enough to work for? Drop all this! There's some fields round here—some decent walks——"

"I don't want you," Tilly repeated, passionately. "You're not a man! You only try to pick me up again when you think you will. I—you devil!"

She forgot herself completely, in her mingled resentment and misery, as he shifted his hands up to her face again, and left his silencing kisses with utter daring upon her lips, her cheeks, her eyes, in turn. She clenched her fingers, and moaned; but he did not seem to mind that in the least; and gradually her resistance weakened to a shiver.

"There," he said, satisfied. "How's that? That's my answer to everything. You had your own way all round

last time, didn't you? I've given you fair time to think about it, haven't I? Cut back to the house, if you like; I shall come in with you; I don't care for any of your 'mistresses.' I saw you anticking about at the top window—that was good enough for me. This way or that —whichever you like."

Tilly, her face drooped and colorless, stood back from him, and tried to think—then finally walked on, as if resigning herself willy-nilly for the time being. Bert fell into step, with one hand lightly on her shoulder.

"That's better," he said. "That's sensible, when you know you can't get away from it. Feel as if we're walking down the old Row, now, can't we? Bit o' fun in those times, wasn't it? I should say! Surprised you ain't slipped me and got married, Tilly. Made sure, when I got out of it at Portsmouth, I should find you'd got 'hung up' and gone off to live in the sub-bubs. Well, how have you been going all this time?"

Church-bells, starting from several points almost simultaneously, began to clang out their call. For some reason or other the sounds had an unlooked-for effect upon Tilly Westaway. A moment ago she had felt as if a little tornado was pent up within her; now she felt threatened with a fit of weeping.

"You go, Bert!" she begged, pausing. "It's no use; I can't cheat myself like you can. I'll part friends, if you want to. But you go—I can't bear it—I know I'm only being made a fool of!"

"Don't be silly," was his well-worn rejoinder. "Here you are, I've got my arm all round you—what d'you want to cry for? Don't talk about parting, when we've only just started off afresh. I shall begin on your lips again, if you don't mind!"

"Why"—she held back his arm, and made her effort —"why did you come all this way? If you wanted me, you'd have come long ago—whether I wanted you or

not. Is it just another o' your selfish freaks, or what? I want to know the meaning of it, before I go a step farther. I'm not—not bound to you in any way, and never have been!"

"'Cept that you can't get away from me, unless I like to let you go," replied Bert, tilting back the pseudo-yachtsman's cap he wore, and showing the strong growth of jet-dark ringlets beneath. "That's straight, ain't it? You will have it, you know! I can't help myself coming after you, can I?—you shouldn't have been a woman, if you want to keep yourself locked up. What I want to know is, why you can't take me on, and find out whether I'm game or not all in good time."

"There's something in it," Tilly said to herself, as she looked with filmed, far-away eyes across the dim breadth of Highbury Fields, splashed here and there with wavering radiance reflected from the tall arc-lamps. "You wouldn't have thought of me again after all this time—for nothing. Oh, no!"

"What's two or three months in a lifetime?" he parried, pooh-poohingly. "Go on, have a good cry, if you want to, and done with it—I don't mind! Why, you're like a summer cabbage—all heart. Course, I could have had a dozen girls by this time, if I'd wanted to; but it so happened I didn't; I had my eye this way. Honor bright, you'd have heard my 'call' long enough ago, if I'd only known the street—never mind about the house."

"Who told you?" Tilly had to ask, once more made to gaze wistfully up at him and read, if she could, into the recesses of his windowless mind.

"Ah, there you are!" he laughed, elusive as ever. To her, it looked every moment as if he were about to click his heels lightly together, trill something from the corner of his mouth, and execute a few steps of a "cellar-flap" dance. But he was surprisingly frank for once, as he felt for his cigarettes, lit one coolly, and pretended

to burn her cheek with it—Tilly refusing to flinch in the least. "All right; if you want to know everything—as you always must—I'll tell you. Don't go and give your brother Giddy away, though—because he looked as if he could do with the twopence. Yes, I hung about till I came across Giddy, and just asked him where you were. He didn't know; of course, he wouldn't. 'Find out,' I said, 'and there's the twopence—not till then.' In about ten seconds he was back with a letter off the mantelpiece that you'd written home. I tore off the corner, and there you are. If you like to feel, you'll find it in my waistcoat pocket. Besides——"

"What?" asked Tilly quickly, as he paused and passed a hand upward over his face. "What?"

"Oh, it's all right; I was only just casting my thoughts. 'Tisn't months by a long chalk since you heard me give you the 'call' one night, and was too proud to stop for a word. Don't say you don't remember, and that I haven't given you a thought for so long. Yes, you know!—just nearabouts old Blowhard's shop."

"Kingdom's?" She grabbed at his sleeve involuntarily. "Bert, *was* that you—that night?"

"You know it was," he replied, content now as a matter of policy to shake off her hold. "And you knew it then, and showed it."

"Then—where were you? What were you doing? Why did you want to frighten me? Why do you *always* seem to be playing some game with me?"

Bert held up his cigarette, and blew the burnt tip into space. He deprecated emotionalism as waste of good stuff.

"You don't give a fellow too much rope, do you? You like to turn a thing right inside out before you buy it, don't you?" he observed tensely—while yet, as she had noted on a former occasion, his thoughts seemed to be partly absorbed in another direction. "As it hap-

pened, I didn't rush after you that time, because you mightn't have fancied the cut o' my clothes. But if you'd ha' come just a bit closer——"

"What!" Tilly gasped, bringing her hands sharply together. "Was that beggar man on the curb *you?*"

And Bert, after a quick little look all round, bent himself in a laugh. "Good Lord," he said, "you ought to see your face! You've got it in once—that was me. How do you fancy yourself, tied up to a blind man, and collecting the coppers in a tin mug?"

Tilly, apparently, had no sense of humor whatever. Her face remained questioningly rigid.

"What did you do it for—the beggar bis'ness?" came her inevitable query. "Don't tell me any more lies, Bert—don't! What were you up to?"

He shrugged. "Had to do something for a bed and breakfast, and didn't want myself known—that's all about it. Thought I'd try the game just for once. I got three-ha'pence in four hours. *You* didn't feel touched to the extent of a penny, did you?"

Not all his irresponsible banter could seem to infect Tilly. She rocked herself to and fro a little, as an aid to thought, while she gazed again across Highbury Fields.

"There's something in it," she repeated to herself. "I'm a fool!—I'm a fool to hope he means a word he says, or ever did. I'm only sorry I *was* born a woman!"

"Come on!" said Bert briskly, seeing that the scales swung anew. "You'll be had up for loitering, old daisy. Give us your arm!" And he impelled her on, feigning not to notice that her feet stumbled reluctantly—that she was fighting stubbornly against him still, while yet she would have given all in the world to be able to believe in him. "My word, you haven't half tumbled into a quiet show here! What is it—the end of

the world, or what? Shall feel I'm walking into a two-penny fair, with all the orange-peel and sawdust about, when I get back to Stepney. Here, come and have a drink!—the pubs. have just opened. Just one—a drop o' cherry-brandy—to put a bit o' life in you!"

"Not for worlds," said Tilly, sadly but deeply. "You go by yourself, if you wish."

"Oh, all right, just as you like. Here's a seat—come and sit on my knee and sing me to sleep. No? Well, I shall begin to think you've hopped out o' your own flesh-and-blood soon. What *do* you want to do?"

"Nothing," said Tilly, vaguely but truthfully. "Nothing at all; I'm too miserable."

"Well, that's cheap, if not filling," Bert pronounced. "What did you tell the old girl?—I see her screwing on me through the blind. How'd she come to let you out?"

"I daresay you can guess," answered Tilly, as with scorn for herself. "I told her a lie, to save a bother outside her house—I said you were my young man. She little thinks!"

Bert had no option but to draw a deep breath.

"Well, you are a prize-packet to walk out with, and no mistake. Here!" He stopped, as on a warm impulse. "I tell you what—I'm going to buy you a ring. How's that?"

Tilly's arm, linked by his own, seemed to give a little convulsive contraction. But she did not reply.

"A ring," he emphasized. "I'm not always right down on my luck—don't think that. Might have a stone or two in it—well, one, at any rate," he stipulated carefully, in case her thoughts should have jumped to a plain band. "Or you could have a locket, if you'd rather—as you're a woman."

Still the silence. Bert seemed a shade discouraged.

"Never seen you wearing any—p'raps you don't catch on with jewelry," he suggested.

"I've never thought about it," said Tilly faintly. "I don't think I care much for it."

"Thought so," commented Bert. "First woman to admit it. Suppose your missis has set you against it. Suppose she's one o' these square-rigged old frumps that won't have anything o' that sort about her?"

"Oh, no," said Tilly. "She's got plenty of everything in that way—she's a lady, and can dress according. I'm not, and never shall be; and that's the difference."

"You might be," reflected Bert, who, whatever else, was no pessimist.

"Might be!" Tilly had to echo. "Money couldn't do that—no more than it could make you a gentleman. I've found that out."

"Straight?" queried Bert, yawning. "Well, it didn't look much of a show to me—your house; not what I'd expected. Suppose she's one o' the miserly, hoarding-up sort—plenty of 'em about here, by the look of it."

"She's nothing of the sort," Tilly permitted herself to reply, distantly. "She's better off than a good many West-Enders, only she doesn't make a song of it. The house outside is nothing; it's beautiful enough inside."

"Any children?"

"None."

"Course not," Bert recollected; "they don't believe in it nowadays, do they? Wise birds! Well, you must have a pretty mum time of it there—only just the three of you—eh? Wouldn't suit me."

"It doesn't suit me, p'raps," said Tilly more calmly. "But it isn't given to me to pick and choose." She stopped. "Where are we?—What are we coming this way for? Oh, how my head aches!"

Bert looked about him.

"There's some water here," he said. "Looks as if it

runs right slap underneath the church there. P'raps they tilt a plank and do a bit o' cheap baptizing with it, eh? Don't seem like a bit o' London just here at all, does it?"

They had paused by a railed bank past which, amid surroundings almost rural in their hush and aspect, that limpid thread, the New River, wound placidly on to its outlet. It did, as Bert said, seem to flow directly beneath a gray old church on the opposite bank, its black surface catching cathedral-like tints from the illumined narrow windows.

"Oh, I'm so miserable! Oh, God, help me!" said Tilly, with a sudden frightening sob. She leaned against the railing, and not all Bert's tugs could turn her.

"Making a fool of yourself," he warned her, discreetly. "You don't want to come here too often, if you feel like that. Dunno what there is to feel miserable about."

"You!" came Tilly's muffled voice. "You! You feel nothing. I knew that long ago. Why did I ever let myself think twice of you? Why *did* I?"

Bert seemed unable to answer this, and smoked carelessly as an arm-in-arm couple tripped lovingly, happily, by. A policeman followed, with a side-glance at the motionless pair by the railing; then the quietness held again—broken of a sudden by a grand organ-peal from the church, and then a swell of voices.

"Lead us, Heavenly Father, lead us . . . !"

Tilly's head went lower and lower. Sob after sob broke audibly, although she had her handkerchief hard to her lips.

"Oh, mother!" she said, burstingly. "Oh, mother! . . . If you *had* been a mother to me! Oh, if I hadn't father left in the world to think of!"

Then by degrees, as the church music died away, she became still. She looked up piteously, half dazedly, as

she found Bert's arms around her again, and his cheek against hers.

"Want to do away with yourself?" he had muttered, coaxingly. "That's all nonsense. I'm here, ain't I? No more o' that; give us a real kiss, old girl; give us all you've got!"

Tilly flung her arms wildly about his neck, drew them tight, as if she would crush the breath from him—and then shivered. The arms fell away.

"No!—no!" she whispered, as if answering some one at a distance. "No!"

Even Bert was impressed. He looked at her with a half-derisive, half-uneasy, expression. It struck him that she was repeating two or three words feverishly over and over again to herself, while her fingers happened to be plucking at her throat.

"Turned Roman Cath'lic, have you?" he queried. "Don't love me a little bit, eh?"

"Yes!" said Tilly, with a sudden composure, able to look back steadily at him. "Yes, Bert; I'm not a liar—p'raps I do love you. But I know I mustn't!"

There was a brief, uncertain pause, and then, before he could fairly realize, she had turned determinedly and walked away into the darkness.

"Sooner or later!" went his shout after her. "Don't forget!"

He took off his cap, gave it a spin in the air, put it rakishly on again, and strolled off in the other direction—with a smile.

CHAPTER XII

HERE she is," said Victor Richards, with his quiet little laugh.

It was Tuesday—although much nearer three o'clock than twelve; and he was holding very patiently and carefully in position a fan-shaped length of dress-material, while Alice's flying machine-needle ran row after row of ornamental stitching along the base of it. Incidentally, he was becoming quite useful in many little intimate departments of the work—particularly in "untacking"; but this fact was sacred to himself and Alice alone.

"Keep still, dear,—just another second," said Alice. "There!"—as she "finished off" and rose quickly. "Why, yes, nearly three o'clock—poor Tilly! Something must have happened."

Something had. The woman below had already answered the hurried double knock, and Tilly was puffing and struggling up the stair as if at the end of a race. Alice ran, and she burst in, managing to smile, indeed, but with very swollen eyes and the echo of several sobs in her voice.

"Sit down, dear" said Alice, concernedly. "We hadn't quite given you up. Why, you *have* been crying, dear! Give me your parcel!"

"It's nothing—only a few little things for Jimmy—not half what I wanted to take him," gulped Tilly. "It's all right, Mr. Richards—I'm all right now; I ought to have stopped and had my dinner, but I couldn't!" He had taken her hand and stroked it soothingly. "I'm such a

silly; but it did seem extra hard—on my only day out before Christmas!"

Victor Richards nodded toward the little decanter, and Tilly was persuaded to swallow just a sip, and wiped her eyes, and felt a trifle better.

"There, it's all over now, and can't be helped," she said. "But it does seem as if all these little upsets bob up out of spite to crush the spirit out of any one—doesn't it?"

"What was it, dear?" asked Alice, who had popped a small kettle on the fire without being noticed.

"Oh, a mere nothing, now it's all done with," declared Tilly, shakily. "But just at the time it seemed as if the whole world had come to an end. Why, just think! I'd bustled up and got all ready—got all my things on, and felt so excited—at five minutes to twelve. If I hadn't just happened to go to the stairs and call out 'good-bye, mum,' to the mistress again, I should have just escaped it. Poor thing, though—I don't know whatever she'd have done. Why, she just happened to think of something—she generally does, I will own—and ran out. 'O Tilly!' she says, 'Before you go, just bank up the stove with those wet cinders, and put that cauldron over them for the last o' the Christmas puddings—there's no need at all to waste the gas for boiling it up!' 'Right, mum,' I says—never thinking what I'd done for myself. What could have done it, goodness only knows; but just as I give the fire a last pat with the shovel, down came a great cloud o' soot—all over me—all over the pudding-kettle and the rug and everything; my hair was full, and you couldn't see my hat at all. I couldn't help it: I burst out, and sat down all in it. The mistress rushed down, and thought I'd done it out o' spite—I know she did, for the minute. And the smoke was pouring out—oh, you never saw what I looked like! When I'd managed to clear the worst of it away, I had to go into the scullery and take every rag off myself, and wash all over again. The mistress shook my

jacket, and lent me one of her hats; but that couldn't make up for my time. I've got to be off again, almost before I've come!"

"Time for this, dear, at any rate," said Alice, pouring some boiling water into a midget teapot. "Just a cup, and a biscuit, and you'll go off feeling much better. It was hard, but we'll have all our talk at another time—something still to look forward to. What's this, dear?"

Tilly looked down, and colored a little consciously. "This" was something that, in spite of her upset, she had been holding very gingerly throughout in a paper bag.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "I just snatched it up as I came away. If you wouldn't mind, I was going to ask if you'd take care of them for a few days, and water them just now and then. I didn't want the mistress to see them—she might have thought I was cracked."

Victor Richards and his wife both gazed in doubtful wonder as she drew from the bag a piece of firewood, from which, suspended by wire passed through their shells, hung half a dozen very large brown, spotted eggs.

"I dunno what made me do it—I dunno whether it's any earthly good," Tilly explained, as carelessly as she could. "You can see what they are, can't you?—turkey eggs. Missis had them for master's breakfast all through last month—or the month before—when they were in season, anyway; and one day I—well, I was thinking about father, to tell the truth, and whether he couldn't make a few pence somehow for himself—for his pipe o' tobacco—by selling something in the Row. Master's such a particular eater, and only made a weeny hole for his egg-spoon in the top; and one day it struck me—as they looked so uncommon and life-like. I dipped 'em in the tea-leaves to turn 'em dark, made a small drain hole in the bottom, put wire through, and then filled 'em with mold, and put two little snowdrop bulbs in each, with some moss on top, just to see what 'ud happen—like a

hanging-basket I'd seen made in the shape of a cracked egg. I kept 'em at the top o' the warm airing cupboard, and watered 'em each day—and that's what's come of it. I thought of taking 'em to father, to sell—but I don't know; he might laugh, after all. They'd sell anywhere, I know; but I couldn't keep 'em in the house longer—I didn't want the mistress to think father was as 'pushed' as all that. And she's got such a knack o' taking me unawares with a question—that I couldn't turn off without telling a lie. So there they are!"

Victor Richards took the swaying curiosity by the stick, and held it up. Neither he nor Alice commented; for some reason, they did not seem able to think of anything appropriate.

From the moss capping four of the eggs a little sheaf of "forced" spear-like leaves rose attractively, with an oval white blossom, ready to expand, just visible here and there like a spire. Of the remaining two, one was just sprouting tardily, and the other was conceivably a failure.

"If you don't take them, Tilly," Victor said at last, "I'd like them for a little Christmas gift; and the bulbs would grow again each year—to remind us."

"You keep them," said Tilly, quietly. She finished her tea. "I've seen you both, as I said—that's everything. And now I must rush. Good-bye—good-bye!"

It was ten minutes past four, and practically dark, as Tilly got off the electric car and came in sight of the gray, blotchy square of buildings—the "Overflow." As she panted up, she was unrolling a slip of paper taken from her purse.

She stopped suddenly, with a perilous catch of her breath, and stared.

"Well, am I on my head or my heels to-day?" she appeared to say to herself.

"Here you are, then," said Bob Kingdom, quite casu-

ally, his big form looming up leisurely beside her. "Got here all right, then?"

"Got here?" repeated Tilly, too astounded to be aware of a vague thrill of gratification. "Yes, but—whatever are *you* doing here?"

"Thought I'd come," he told her. "Might as well, as I didn't write. Nothing much doing this week; had a bit o' time owing me."

"What, were you coming in with me—to see Jimmy?" Tilly cried. And he nodded briefly. "Well!" she said, stepping back, mentally carried quite past herself. "Fancy! I shan't forget that in a hurry—for you to think of him like that—that's a real friendly bit! . . . There, now, if I'd only known! You can't!"

"No good?" queried Bob Kingdom. "No go?"

"Not till five o'clock—with the crowd. Oh, what a shame! I wrote off for a 'permit' to see him an hour earlier, the moment I knew I'd got to be home again by seven—and of course it's only made out for one. And you waiting here like that!"

Bob Kingdom scratched his head and eyed her with a mingled cherubimic innocence and vast cogitation that at any other time would have tickled her deeply. It was fairly evident that he had come with a little smoldering curiosity on his own account.

"What about trying?" he suggested. "Mightn't say anything at a pinch, eh?"

Tilly, conscious of slipping moments, if of nothing else, looked across at the gate under the arch.

"Come on!" she decided. "*You* take the permit, and they mayn't say anything about me, as I look such a dot against you. If they do—well, they must, that's all. Fancy you being here, though!—I can't get over it. This is the bell; ring it—not too loud."

Bob Kingdom pulled the bell-handle carefully; and at length steps were heard on the paved yard within.

"Just show him the paper, and say: 'Good-evening—thank you!' and walk straight on," directed Tilly hurriedly. "They're civil to nice people, and nasty to others."

"Evening thank you!" muttered Bob Kingdom in one breath, as the gate-opener appeared, and moved straight on, Tilly swaying at his heels. The man stared after them, and said something about "Might as well have waited till five!" but he had scarcely had time to glance at the "permit."

"To see James Westaway, if you wouldn't mind," said Tilly, with a trembling politeness, when at length an attendant appeared at the farther door. "We have permission."

"One has," the attendant corrected, bending back so that a very economical light from the long, corridor-like room fell across the paper he held.

"Oh, that'll be all right!" said Tilly, ingratiatingly, if not hintingly.

The man "hoped so," strained a point, and went off to find and acquaint James Westaway.

"You see, it's like this," breathed Tilly, trying to believe that she felt very cool and collected. They had sunk down into one of the niches, and Bob Kingdom was gazing all round him with parted thick lips and slowly absorbing eyes. "They get little 'tips' now and again from most of the visitors—and you can't wonder, seeing what they have to put with from some of the insiders—kicks and scratches and throwing their food about, and all that; but I can't afford to offer them anything worth taking, much as I'd like to. If you *do* feel like leaving a copper or two on the corner of the table, Mr. Kingdom, *they* won't mind. No, not now—not yet!" Bob Kingdom was feeling in his trousers' pocket then and there. "Wait till Jimmy's been and gone, or he'll think it's for himself—he thinks money grows in everybody's pockets but his own, you know."

"Got any, has he?" murmured Bob Kingdom. "Sixpence any good to him? Got these apples up the road. Like apples, does he?"

Tilly bit her lip, as the bagful was unwedged from his huge coat-pocket. "Oh, you are good!" was all she could whisper. "You're *too* good, considering!" ("He must take after his mother," she told herself.)

They sat on. The silence of the long room—of the whole building, as it seemed—had a checking effect upon both thought and speech. Bob Kingdom, to judge from his expresson, appeared to think it all very extraordinary—if only by reason of its tameness. He was not likely to say, but quite possibly he had imagined tier upon tier of strong cages, whose occupants leaped at the bars and performed other fascinating antics. Tilly half believed, indeed, that, rumbling it over in his mind, he had considered it not quite the thing for her to go alone.

"Quiet and funny, isn't it?" she whispered, stealing a look up at him. "Never think it was crowded from end to end with the poor things, would you? This is only the men's side, you know—they keep 'em quite apart, in case of any goings-on, I s'pose. Do hope Jimmy hasn't got one of his broody fits on, and won't come out; it looks very much like it. There's one thing: he never tears his bedclothes to bits, or anything of that, like some of 'em do. I'm sure, it must be worth two pounds a week to be attendant in these places—have to be more than human I should think. They're all on the big side, if you notice—big chaps, I mean. And they need be!"

Bob Kingdom gazed at her concentratedly, and then turned his head to look through the window behind them. There was still a remnant of daylight left, apart from the lamp-glow from various parts of the building; and a breadth of open space, dotted here and there with flower-beds, was visible. Bob's interest became riveted by the fact that several persons—presumably patients—were

still taking physical relaxation in this space, each according to his idea of exercise.

"You see that one," said Tilly, pointing. "Wait a second—he'll come by again, because he never stops it. . . . Here he is! I've heard that he's a rich gentleman—really, not in his mind; he looks as if he'd been a manager somewhere, doesn't he? If you ever care to come here again—when it's daylight—I'll point 'em all out to you. Makes you feel like laughing for a minute—till you feel you could cry."

The rich gentleman had apparently no connection, or desire for it, with any one else in his vicinity. Erectly aloof, he scorned the childishness of two others, who walked arm-in-arm, gravely changing hats with each other at intervals as they went. At a truly martial stride, he marched from end to end of the space, halting at each turn to draw a mythical sword from its scabbard and bring it to the salute with splendid dignity. If he suggested a "manager somewhere," his model was undoubtedly Napoleonic.

Others, in contrast, sauntered about with hands linked behind them, apparently conversing quite rationally and feeling no discomfort whatever in the prescribed nature of the freedom.

"Some of 'em, you know, are getting better every day, and 'll go out sooner or later," explained Tilly, as Bob Kingdom's mouth remained so wide open. "Of course, you can't go by the looks of 'em. While they can walk about, as if everything in the world's all right, it shows there's something all wrong. Because if any one came sane of a sudden, and found himself in here, he'd *go* mad, at the very idea of being cut off from his people and being thought a lunatic, as you might say."

"He would?" queried Bob Kingdom torpidly, trying to grasp this. "Rumbustical place all round, then? Go mad if you ain't mad, eh?"

"It's a very *real* place, if you've got anybody of your own inside it," said Tilly, with some decision. "But a lot of 'em do work of some sort, you know; the doctor here—I wish you could see him; such a stately gentleman! —believes in bringing 'em back to their senses and their old ideas that way, if he only can. A lot of the women make clothes, or mend the men's shirts, or play the piano while the others do it; in fact, I've heard that some of 'em 'll work much harder here for nothing without knowing it than ever they would do at home for their living or their husbands. Just like bringing up a fam'ly of freak children, isn't it? Yes; when they're recovering a bit, they help the attendants—call 'em 'helpers,' they do. But even then you have to be awfully careful and keep your eye open. A woman who comes here had her daughter at an asylum down in the country somewhere—I forget where. Well, one of the female 'helpers' and an attendant there were going to give some poor young thing a bath; and just at the minute the attendant had to rush off to some one in a foaming fit in the next ward. The 'helper' went mad again at all the noise, pulled the poor young thing into the bath, held her down by force, and, as you might be sure, turned the wrong tap on her."

"Boiled her," muttered Bob Kingdom, grasping this quite quickly.

"Well, don't put it like that—say 'finished' her," corrected Tilly. "Of course, it couldn't be helped; but it's heart-breaking all the same. Just look!—twenty to five! Come along, Jimmy, do! All my 'day' seems a mix-up this time, somehow."

The distant door opened, and some one appeared, as if stimulated by a gentle push from behind.

Tilly stood up involuntarily, and Bob Kingdom, evidently thinking it the right thing in the circumstances, did the same.

CHAPTER XIII

HULLO, Jimmy boy," said Tilly, with the restraint of experience—any marked warmth of welcome having an adverse effect in James Westaway's case. "How are you? Come along, we're all to ourselves this time. This is Mr. Bob Kingdom—he thought he'd like to have just a friendly look at you and the place. Remember Mr. Bob Kingdom by sight, don't you? Surely!"

Jimmy did not seem inclined for any such mental effort. He had come down the long room rather furtively and reluctantly, and gave only a sheepish side-glance at Bob Kingdom, being apparently more attracted by the bulge of the bag of apples.

"What you got?" he jerked out, ignoring the chair.

"Well, that's a good beginning," commented Tilly, to melt the ice at once. "I should think the question is—where have you been hiding all this time? Come, now, do try and talk a bit, Jimmy, and get yourself out of yourself for once. D'you hear?—we've been sitting like a couple of dummies here for nearly half an hour. Why didn't you come sooner?"

Jimmy blew upon his fingers. "They didn't tell me," he said.

"I don't believe it," declared Tilly, nudging Bob Kingdom. "That can't be true."

"They wanted to wash me," enlarged Jimmy, to be done with details and clear the way to the apple-bag.

"Ah, that's more like it," she said. "Well, haven't you

got a single word to say to Mr. Kingdom here, after all this time?"

"What's he come for?" asked Jimmy, with an impatient scowl. "What's he brought?"

"Oh, dear, I'm afraid he's a 'case,'" Tilly said, out of the corner of her mouth, to Bob Kingdom. "What do you think of him? Would you give any hopes?"

"Can't see much the matter," reflected Bob Kingdom, eying the subject obliquely. "Seems to think of his belly first—but lots do that. Bit strange and off-hand, like—nothing much."

"Just what I say!" confirmed Tilly, with unwonted warmth. "I don't know what grounds they've got to keep him here for. If people have funny children, or bring 'em down instead of bringing 'em up, they should be made to look after 'em—not call it 'God's will' and clap 'em inside four walls. It's cruel! *I* couldn't do it, not if I had to follow 'em about everywhere. I heard one of the doctors here say as much—if all the people who do silly things were put in the asylum, there'd be very few left outside. I feel something ought to be done about it."

"There's one thing—what you just said," went on Bob Kingdom, abstractedly. "If they don't mind so much being here, shows there's a little something wanting on top, eh?"

"Ah, yes, I s'pose so," owned Tilly, sadly. "I generally manage to forget that unless I'm only thinking about the other poor things and leaving him out." She roused. "Now, come on, Jimmy!—do sit down and look as if you're enjoying yourself for a minute. What d'you want to keep over there for?—we shall be gone again before you know where you are. Come, what did you have for dinner?"

"Pudd'n," vouchsafed Jimmy, after a while.

"What, nothing with it?"

"Cocoa. And medicine," he recollected to add.

"None too filling, is it?" pondered Bob Kingdom. "Could do with something in between, eh? Give him these."

" 'Sh!" warned Tilly. "Not all at once. If you do, ten to one he'll sidle off with 'em, and we shan't see any more of him. You never know just what to do for the best. Here, Jimmy! (Like coaxing up a pet dog, ain't it?) Jimmy boy!"

She slid one apple astutely, alluringly, to the edge of the table. Jimmy watched it sideways for a time, and then made a sudden unsteady swoop with his white sticks of fingers, and devoured it, core and all, in a few ravenous gulps.

"Look at that!—awful, ain't it?" murmured Tilly. "And yet they say here that he won't eat. I can't make top or tail of it. If he can eat like that, you'd think he'd fill out in the body a little, at least."

"Mightn't agree," Bob Kingdom reflected. "Want chewing just a bit. Might come up again shortly, ate that way. Here's the sixpence—give him that. Buy anything here, can he?"

"Goodness knows," said Tilly. "I hope so. It's a funny thing, but you can always get rid of money, wherever you are. Wait a minute—I shouldn't like to think he went and swallowed it, thinking himself a bank or a post-box. Haven't got coppers, have you?—they're larger, and look more."

Bob Kingdom rummaged, and found seven pennies. Tilly watched to see whether he would retain the odd one, and felt that she almost loved him because he did not. Tilly took out her own handkerchief.

"Jimmy," she said, impressively. "See this? I'm tying up seven pennies for you in the corner o' this handkerchief; so whenever you want one, you've only got to take one out. There, it's in your breast-pocket.

That's a present from Mr. Kingdom to you; so you'll want to see him again some day, won't you?"

Jimmy scowled furtively again at the donor. "Another apple," he muttered.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Tilly, losing heart. "I'm sure I don't know what they'd do with you at home, if you did come out; they'd have to lock all the cupboards, that's a certainty. Now, look here, if you like to come and sit down here between us, Jimmy, and talk while you eat, Mr. Kingdom says you can have the lot. And then I've got a few little things in this parcel for you besides. If not, you can't have either the apples or the parcel. So choose!"

While Jimmy was considering the alternatives at a distance, a clock struck five. An attendant appeared, swinging his keys; in another minute the tramp of many feet over the courtyard could be heard, and the long room began to fill. Bob Kingdom, not quite prepared for this automatic procedure—not quite certain, at any rate, whether he was surrounded by patients or outsiders—looked as if he had taken leave of his own wits for the moment; and Jimmy, seeing his opening, made a dash for the apple-bag, and a bolt for the distant door.

"That's done it," gasped Tilly. "He's off. I was afraid of it. That's all we shall see of him to-day. We may as well go, and make room for others."

"Half a minute," urged Bob Kingdom, profoundly impressed by the proceedings. "Which is which? All mixed up now, ain't they?"

"That's just how I felt, when I came first," Tilly told him. "You have to watch which door—hullo, how are *you* to-day?"

Mr. Chambers, the strenuous collector of metal trophies, advancing down the room rather dejectedly, had caught sight of Tilly, and pounced upon her as an old friend.

"Ah, I'm feeling very low indeed—much lower than usual," he told her, tremulously. "I ought not to be upon my feet at all. I've been robbed of all my money since I last saw you."

"Oh, I am grieved to hear that," said Tilly, taken unawares. "However could it have happened?"

She nudged Bob Kingdom, who sat scarcely breathing in his interest for the plundered invalid.

"Well, if I tell you, don't publish it outside, because I intend to bring a crushing action against the Crown," Mr. Chambers confided to them. "Of course I know that you can never win an action against the Crown, whether you're in the right or not; but I intend to show them up, and so kill two birds with one stone. If this doesn't open the people's eyes, nothing will." He licked his lips and looked around. "Of course, you *have* guessed by now that I'm Oliver Cromwell's half-brother, put in the Tower for a purpose?"

"Oh, yes," said Tilly, who knew nothing about the person named. "I thought something of the kind, of course,—we all did. But there's your poor sister beckoning——"

"Confound her," he said, with depth. "She's a hussy; she's a spy; I haven't done with her yet. You see, it's like this: I'm surrounded by the enemy here, and I can trust no one inside either, which makes it awkward for me. As you know, I had a hundred and fifty-nine pieces of gold on me; and last week one of my generals came into camp and told me the army wouldn't advance against Charles unless they had food and clothes; some of them, you know, had eaten nothing for ages, and were quite naked and exposed to the enemy. Well, what could I do? I advanced the whole of my money, on the condition that Charles's head should be brought to me in a dish as proof of the victory. Up till now, I've seen not a sign of it. I've been betrayed—it can only mean one

thing or the other. And without fresh funds—I suppose *you* haven't such a thing as a trouser-button on you at the moment, sir, that I could change into coin of the realm?"

Bob Kingdom stared blankly, and conceivably came as near blushing as his thick skin permitted. Tilly nudged him again, and whispered.

"Find one—give him one, if you only can—or we shall never get rid of him!"

Bob Kingdom stirred, looked all about him a trifle uneasily, and finally fumbled beneath his waistcoat. With a jerk the necessary disc was dislodged. But, unfortunately, Bob Kingdom's trouser-buttons happened to be of a patent sort designed for the use of bachelors disliking needles and trouble; and Mr. Chambers looked at the specimen—at the unusual large hole in the middle—with grave disapproval.

"This is a bad one; a rank bad one," he said. He bit it, and tried it on the table. "This won't do at all; it might get me into trouble with the troops. Try again, if you don't mind, sir; I shall be quite satisfied with two—or three, if you can spare them while you're here."

Tilly seemed to think it high time to do something decisive, and swung Mr. Chambers cleverly round.

"Here, look," she said; "there's your sister holding one up. I do believe she's brought you a whole bagful. Quick!"—with a rousing tug at Bob Kingdom's arm. "This way!"

Ere Mr. Chambers could cope with the position, they were outside. Tilly paused just a second to wipe her eyes and recollect herself, as she said, and then the entrance-gate swung into place behind them, and the light and life of the busy main thoroughfare opened out before them.

"Oh, my!" cried Tilly, quite involuntarily. "What a difference—all lit up! Oh, I don't know when I did

see the shops after dark last!—looked just like a fairy-land, for the moment!"

"Christmas,—a bit extra of everything," Bob Kingdom reminded her. "Walk on a little, eh?"

They walked on, down an avenue of glittering windows and naphtha-lit curb-stalls, with the white glow from the tall arc-lamps wavering over all. The stalls were heaped with fruit of all tints, and roped with garlands of holly and evergreens; the windows gleamed back a kaleidoscopical coloring and profusion; all London seemed to be out of doors, admiring or purchasing; and a cheerful babel of sound filled the air. Tilly, who had seemed to lose touch with the familiarity of it all lately, felt sad and ecstatic in the same moment.

"Lovely," she said, more than once. "Lovely!—if you can only keep from looking down the side-streets. But, there, I mustn't go thinking I'm one of the crowd; I've got to get back and clean all the silver—a nice pile it is, too."

"Had your tea?" queried Bob Kingdom, pausing to glance down at her from his great height.

"Tea?" Tilly almost laughed. "Haven't had my dinner yet—and shan't, now; let it all slide, in the hurry. Why?"

"Looks like a quietish place just here." He nodded toward a coffee-shop on his left. "Do as well as anywhere, eh? Generally like my cup about this time."

"Oh, yes, by all means, you have it," said Tilly, stoutly. "It is very friendly of you to put yourself out this far on my account, and I shan't forget it. I can get my half-way car just up the road; I don't go by bus all the way as I used to—found it a roundabout way. There was only the one question I would have liked to——"

"Plenty of time," suggested Bob Kingdom, showing her his watch—hands at twenty-five past five. "Shouldn't

let yourself go too long; get run down. Just a cup and a snack."

"What, me?—with you?" Tilly drew back, both surprised and delighted. "Oh, but I shouldn't dream of forcing myself on you to that extent—well, it *is* thoughtful of you, I must say!" She had got out her small purse, and then put it hastily back, as he shook his head. "Fancy me!" she said to herself. "What's come to me?—I wouldn't have let Bert pay for anything, to save my life."

After Bob Kingdom had rolled a glance all round the shop-interior, they entered. "What's yours?" he muttered. "Wouldn't have haddock—indigestible on top of nothing. Couple of eggs, eh?"

"Oh, only one!" breathed Tilly, with quite a color in her cheeks—no doubt due to the many-odored warmth of the place. "One's quite enough for a woman."

"Dinner as well—make it two," he advised. "Pot of fresh tea—tea-cake twice—four new-laid eggs done soft—and bit o' water-cress," he instructed the waitress. "How long?"

"Only two or three minutes, sir," said the girl, with an intuitive side-smile at Tilly. "'Lightning's' our motto, you know. New-laid brown ones—I'll see to it."

A few minutes passed. Tilly took off her cotton gloves, put them on again, and drew them off again; while Bob Kingdom gazed into space, now and then parting his lips as if to speak, but each time thinking better of it. He *had* something in the background to tell her, Tilly felt positive; but, in the circumstances, she did not see how she could drag it from him without appearing to presume.

The pot of tea came, as a relief; and Bob Kingdom filled the cups without any visible embarrassment—quite like a family man, as Tilly thought to herself. Then the tea-cakes, richly scorched and glistening with butter, arrived, followed in due course by the eggs—water-cress,

unfortunately, being "off." There was no real reason why Tilly should feel like a West-End lady at the head of a banqueting table, but she *did* feel so, and her flaming face and bright eyes showed it.

"Touch of indigestion," said Bob Kingdom, as he glanced at her. "Should eat it slow, and think about it. Plenty of time. Cars every minute. Keep your windows open?"

"Oh, yes," said Tilly. "Top and bottom—ever since you mentioned it in your letter. It seemed rather chilly and blowy at first, but I think I feel much better. I was beginning to have a shut-up feeling all round—what they call 'hot-house,' I s'pose."

"Didn't write again, did I?" he pursued, thoughtfully; and Tilly's heart took a small jump.

"No, you didn't," she said, clearing her throat quickly of a piece of tea-cake. "I couldn't expect it, of course. But I thought—I thought perhaps you would do, so to speak."

"Eat your tea," he instructed. "Tell you later."

From that moment, for Tilly, the tea-cake and eggs lost a little of their flavor, and a suspicion of mist settled down over the enchantment of her scene. However, as his ruminative eye was upon her at intervals, she ate and drank steadily, and, when Bob Kingdom wiped his mouth and felt in his pocket, said she had never enjoyed anything better; it was about the only real touch of Christmas, "out on her own," that she would have.

Bob paid out one-and-fourpence, left twopence lying on the table, got to his feet slowly, and led the way out.

"See you on the car. Plenty of time," he remarked once more. "Got nothing to do for the rest of the evening."

"Oh, how lucky!" whispered Tilly. They had taken to the roadway, the pavement being all but impassable. "How nice, I mean!—how free you must feel. Women

never know what it is to feel like that—'all over and done with and got my money'; at least, I never seem to."

"Nothing so wonderful, when you do," he told her. "Soon want something to do, I expect. Time hangs a bit; not much else except draughts up at the club." He steered her—almost lifted her—out of the way of two passing vehicles. "No, I didn't write again, did I?" he mused. "I went."

"Went?" ejaculated Tilly.

"You know; what you said in yours. Strolled round that way once or twice. Couldn't see any one; thought I'd knock and ask if the water-pipe wanted looking-to again. Didn't see anything of him. Your mother was there."

"Oh," said Tilly, a little sinkingly. "How—how was she?"

"Well, middling, like," he summed up, after a moment for cogitation. "Bit queerish, like. Seemed to think I was the landlord's man, and cried a good deal. Couldn't get the rent together, she said. So after a bit I——"

"You—what?" faltered Tilly, as he paused. "Oh, I hope you didn't——"

"Just one week's," he said; "just to keep things going a bit—only four shillings; and dear at that. Half sorry I did it, p'raps; better have bought a bit o' grocery, p'raps. That's why I didn't write again. Upset you, eh?"

"What would?" quavered Tilly. "What happened?"

"Well,"—he scratched his head reluctantly—"don't want to make a song about it. Happened to run across her again two or three hours later, and fancy she must have spent it, by the look of her. Thought, if I wrote, I should have to tell you. Saw the landlord's agent next day—same club as me. They owe seven weeks', he said; going to clear 'em out of it. Had a few words with him; got him to leave it over a bit—till turned Christmas, at any rate. S'pose they'll have to go, eh?"

Tilly said nothing. It was all she could do to keep back tears and gulps that would seem like a fresh sapping of his sympathies. There was no way of telling him what she felt about it—none. She only ventured to put out her hand, as the stately electric car glided into sight like a jeweled ship at sea, and to give a little squeeze that would make scarce any impression upon his great fingers.

"Thank you for coming," she said, mustering a smile. "Don't think I don't know. It's more than anything else to me to feel you did it without even being asked!"

And yet, hours later, in the privacy of her own small bedroom, when she could have cried to her heart's content, not a single choke would break. With merely a little mechanical shiver now and then, she sat on the edge of the bed and gazed across at the framed inscription which Alice Richards had slipped into her hands one night as a gift, and which hung over the wash-stand there:—

> "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever;
> Do noble deeds, not dream them all day long! . . ."

Tilly had thought that she understood those words in all their fullness, and often repeated them to herself at her work as something too grand and applicable to be forgotten. But now she was thinking that after all they seemed only words—written for a different people, in a different world altogether.

CHAPTER XIV

"OUT!"

It was eight o'clock, on that following Thursday evening. With a majestic roll Mr. Kingdom senior emerged from his premises, greeted a fairly brilliant moon overhead with a "Huh!" which did not imply much faith, gave the hat on his head a settling bang, and, as he filled his pipe, glanced askance at the exceptionally alert movements of the next-door neighbor.

The latter had just sold a rabbit without undue haggling, and was rubbing his red hands together and shouting "Walk up; walk up, you people! We don't keep the stuff—we sell it!" with a heartiness that, as it struck Mr. Kingdom's ears, was wellnigh as pitiful as misleading. Incidentally, Mr. Kingdom's time-limit of three months for the other's tenure and resources had long been passed; and he ascribed the fact to a species of trickery which ought to recoil upon itself sooner or later.

"Doin' all the bis'ness of a sudden, or what?" he allowed himself to inquire, as he struck his match.

"Aha, doing splendidly, Mr. K., thank you," replied the provision-man, with surprising affability, considering that a chilly reserve had existed for some time past. "What we shall be doing this time next year, I'd better not say anything about."

"Wise man, too," commented Mr. Kingdom, lingering with arms akimbo till he could think of something more

emphatic. "What d'you reckon you call that lot—rabbits?"—as the other heaped his remaining six together and then spread them apart again.

"No, I don't call 'em rabbits—not to you, Mr. K.," was the brisk reply. "But there they are. If people like the look of 'em, I can't help it, can I? If you're thinking of one yourself, I mean, you've got to be quick, haven't you? What pink beauties? Walk up! Come along here, I say!—see what you're buying!"

He shouted it still more heartily, as if determined for once not to be cowed by the bulging glare in Mr. K.'s "parboiled" eyes. And it had its effect. Mr. Kingdom spat out into the roadway with emphasis.

"They seem answering all at once, I will admit," he remarked. "Shouldn't be surprised if you sell out; there's a lot o' people starting museums round here. Two curiosity-shops next door to one another ought to make somethin' of a stir, didn't they? What you want, my dear feller, is a stall down the Row, where you could have a bit o' lead under your scales—then you *might* make a livin' by a fluke."

"Buy! Buy!" reiterated the other, with quite an annoying smile. "Oh, I say, Ma, roll up with that basket before you're too late! Buy—buy!"

"Buy! Buy!" snarled Mr. Kingdom, commiseratingly. "Why don't you make a noise while you're about it?" He struck another match, but neglected to use it. "What's that? Tea, eh?" By a fortunate chance he had caught sight of some packets stacked on a shelf inside, and moved a step nearer. "Packets o' tea now, eh;—come down to that game, have you? Commission if you can on'y get rid of 'em, I s'pose—three layers o' lead-foil included in the weight, eh? What is it—'Chig-fo-foo,' or what? S'pose you put it up yourself in the back-parlor, and clapped on a extra twopence for the label? That's the usual thing, I know."

The egg-purveyor laughed, as he sharpened two bacon-knives on each other arrestingly.

"Funny thing, I was just going to say that you had it for breakfast yourself this morning, Mr. K.,—and yesterday—but p'raps I won't," he said. "Look pretty, don't they? Yes, we're increasing the stock in all directions, and no doubt we shall turn it into a limited company before long, and then let it go to smash, and retire on the public's money. Roll up, roll up, buyers! This way for pink Ostend rabbit—better than all your frozen tough turkeys!"

Mr. Kingdom was done—not for want of words, but because the casual reference to "turkey" gave him an excuse to turn about and walk away as if he had remembered something useful. His own nightly objective, of course, lay in the other direction; but, it being the night before Christmas Eve, he was not above taking his seasonable, periodical glance down that typical center—the Row.

He reached the corner—but went no farther. The one glance was all-sufficient. The Row was one sea of heads, one hot glare of light, one sustained roar of sound like that from a smithy forge.

"Look at it; jest look," was drawn audibly from Mr. Kingdom, spite of himself. "And yet they make out there's no money about. No money! Con-found me, they're buyin' all they can lay their bloomin' hands on."

The public-house at the corner alone was well worth studying for a moment. Every compartment was wedged with customers trying in vain to get heard, or, when heard, to reach their refreshment. The barmen raced to and fro; even the manager, with his large cable-chain, his white shirt-sleeves, and his indispensable bowler hat to distinguish him, steamed with sweat and satisfaction. All was a bustle of confusion, with an underlying spirit of goodwill and well-meant determination

to make the most of the "once-a-year" sensation; and battered shoppers, who had run the gauntlet of the roaring Row, were only too glad of a chance to halt and share in it.

"Yus, I managed to wangle a turkey—English—six-and-half a pound. The man done me for fivepence on the post, though. I'll get my own back after Chris'mas, you see if I don't—if I have to borrow a bad bob to spring on him between the lights." "Here, look after them kids, Bill, do; they're being trod on; what d'you want to get so excited for? You can't dance in a couple of inches, even if you was fit, which you ain't." "Six four-ales over here, guv'nor; how much longer? Shove a teat on the 'pull,' and pass it over, if you're too tired!" "Well, strike me pink, if some one ain't been and 'pinched' my purse! Good thing I only had three-ha'-pence left in it—hope it'll haunt the mean swine, who-ever it was!" "Here's bloomin' good health, Joe! Ain't the missis havin' anythin'? Well, fetch her inside, boy —I'll pay; lor' lumme, ain't it Chris'mas? Two o' gin hot, there!" "Hullo, where's 'Liza got to? Any one seen our 'Liza? I never did see; she's like a lump o' buttered lightnin'. I'll tear her ear off, if she's been and dropped them parcels." "'For Auld Lang Syne, my dear—for Auld Lang Syne!' Keep it up; I ain't goin' to bed till Boxin' Day!"

The excitement, heightened by a persistent thudding of "dancing" feet upon the various floors, appeared to satisfy Mr. Kingdom—or, at least, to confirm a mental estimate he had already formed. Wheeling, his glance happened to take in the essential contrast: the figure of a consumptive man bent over a home-made fiddle, from which he extracted a thin rendering of "Ora Pro Nobis," while on either side of him a woman offered lemons in a brassy, deadening voice. The optimism of this performer in imagining himself heard and singled out for

pity, struck even Mr. Kingdom; and just then the man happened to lift his head in an appeal so obviously unpremeditated as to touch an unusual depth of despair. Plainly, the man was dying as he stood there.

"Here you are," fumed Mr. Kingdom, extricating a penny from his waistcoat pocket. "Don't stand snivelin' there; get yourself half a pint. Ought to be swept up and put out o' their misery," he added almost as audibly, as he crossed the road to avoid passing the provision-dealer's establishment again.

"All gone mad, if you ask me," he summarized without reserve, a little later, as he took up his glass and scowled over it at the swaying mistletoe, the ropes of evergreen, the polished mirrors and brasses, and the general appearance of gayety enlivening his own house of call. "Like a lot o' school kids let loose. Job to get this far down the road without bein' bumped to a jelly. Lot o' twaddle and make-believe! Chris'mas is the same to a sensible feller as any other day; don't make a atom o' difference—never did, and never will. Won't to me, at any rate. You'll find me in here as usual, and drinkin' my usual."

"So?" the busy, bland barmaid had just time to reply. "Your wife's a very lucky woman, Mr. Kingdom, I should say."

"My wife's a sensible woman, p'raps," he retorted, disliking the allusion. "She does the same as you for her livin', what she's told."

"Tra la la!" said the barmaid, blowing an imaginary puff of smoke at him. "Hush up till you've had another glass and feel more yourself. Believe you're going to give a children's party on both days."

"My Gawd!" muttered Mr. Kingdom unthinkingly, as he drew out his large crimson handkerchief. "If you want to get rid o' my custom, start talkin' about children give out!"

"Only had one of your own, Mr. Kingdom, didn't you?" half-playfully, half-encouragingly observed one of the bar regulars.

"One," he confirmed, with a convincing snort into the handkerchief. "And quite enough. Whatever I am, I had a little respect for my wife—*as* a wife, and as a bis'ness asset, too. Understand? If there's one sort I'd have pole-axed at sight, it's the man that keeps his wife a walkin' bloomin' monument of his everlastin' 'love' for her; and that's putting it as plain as it deserves, At least, no, I wouldn't on'y pole-axe him—I'd make him do another time on earth as the same woman."

"You are cast-iron on that point, and no mistake," another man was impelled to remark. "You don't make any allowances."

"You're wrong," said Mr. Kingdom deeply. "I do. It's the sort o' man I'm talkin' of, that doesn't. But as you can't change the man, jest change the subject. Who was it sayin' in here last night, and stickin' to it, that there's less money about than ever there was? I'd like to take him for a trot round London on a chain, that I would."

"Oh, you mean Fred Parsons," recollected the other. "He hasn't shown up to-night, so far."

"Course not; pay-day to-day, instead o' Sat-day, ain't it?" rejoined Mr. Kingdom, loudly. "I do like to hear that man talk, I do. Married man, ain't he? I thought so. I'll bet he's outside there somewhere, workin' harder to spend his money than ever he did to earn it. No money about?—bosh and bunkum! It's jest this, same as it always was: the people that have got money, won't own it; and them that haven't—well, they bloomin' well stand on the pavement and shout it. That's the meaning of it, if there is any."

The listeners looked at each other furtively, as if in reference to the fact that on the previous evening Mr.

Kingdom had taken—and carried by sheer force of personality—quite a different line of argument.

"I wouldn't like to say," said one, in defense of the absent Parsons. "I fancy he does a bit o' shopping pay-nights, because his wife can't carry the bags. He's a decent chap when you know him—like every one else, bar a few; had his bit o' bad luck, that's all, and can't make up lost ground again. His bis'ness partner did him out of all his money, so I heard."

"Serve him right," said Mr. Kingdom. "Serve him right, for allowin' of it. Had eyes and ears, didn't he? No man 'ud swindle me in any bis'ness, my dear feller, and no man ever tried it on. I might swindle him—but that's another thing. What's his job now?"

"Fancy I heard him say he hadn't got one—he was 'out' again," somebody volunteered.

"There you are!" pronounced Mr. Kingdom, with outstretched hand. "He's no good at anythin', evidently. I'm sick and tired of hearin' o' these people. I s'pose, if the truth's known, he's jest one o' the sort that got the push last week up at my son's place—the waterworks. No doubt of it!"

"Well, what was it for?" came the query for which he waited, and failing which he would not proceed.

"For? Ask yourself. Usual thing—a bleed'n' idiot. Sort o' man that says he wants work, but on'y means he wants wages. Here, they took him on as an odd 'hand' in the sheds, because he made out he'd walked five miles to hear o' somethin', and hadn't done anythin' for weeks—or years, it might have been, for all I know. Well, he was all right for a lead-off—they always are, that sort. Then, jest because it turned a bit foggy, he roamed in half an hour late two mornin's runnin'. 'Send him in to me,' says the yard boss; and in he went. 'Now, then,' says the boss, 'what's the meanin' o' this caper, and how long d'you reckon we're goin' to put up with

a man like you?' 'Very sorry, sir,' he says; 'but all the trains were half an hour late.' 'All half an hour late?' says the boss. 'What the 'ell does he mean?' 'Why, sir,' he says, as bold as brass, 'that it made me that time late, too.' 'What!' says the boss. 'Why, blimy,' he says, 'a man might jest as well walk in and say all the buses were late. 'D'you think we're goin' to be sucked in by that ancient tale? Look here,' he says. 'If you went to catch the seven-thirty a. m., and all the trains were half an hour late, you'd be catchin' the seven o'clock instead as a matter o' course, wouldn't you? Whatever train you went for, you'd catch the one that ought to have come up beforehand, wouldn't you?' 'Well, sir,' he says, 'I s'pose so. I didn't look at it like that, somehow.' 'No,' says the boss; 'but we do. We know somethin'. There's no such a thing as bein' late on a line where the trains run frequent, because you're bound on your own showin' to catch the one due beforehand, or the one after. You can get about your bis'ness on Sat'day,' he says; 'you're no use to us.' And that's jest what I should ha' told him myself — with a couple o' kicks thrown in."

He drained his glass, and pushed it forward to be refilled. Whatever the listeners thought inwardly, no one had anything ready to advance against the argument; and therefore Mr. Kingdom took it as unassailable.

"Here," he said, "I knew another beautiful little lot, hat were workin' on some buildin's. They found out of sudden it was the longest day o' the year, and they'd e workin' a minute and a half extra—or somethin' o' hat. Down went their tools; down the ladder they come; ff they went in a rush to the guv'nor, and wanted extra ay or time off for the minute and half. 'Not me,' he ays. 'You're mad,' he says; and they chucked the job ere and then. What d'you think o' that?"

The company nodded, with little ejaculations, and tried to work the problem out mentally for themselves.

"Don't let any man tell me he can't get work!" pursued Mr. Kingdom, warming to the aspect of the thing in general. "I'd get work, somehow. I'd start a canoodlin' club, if nothin' else. Or I'd offer myself as a tinned-food trier, if it killed me."

"A what?" asked some one, innocently.

"I didn't say 'a what'; I said a tinned-food trier," boomed Mr. Kingdom. "If you dunno what that is, you ought to. There's one up at the War-Office, for a start; and a good-payin' job, too, if you don't mind runnin' a bit o' risk. I s'pose you do know the War-Office people invite tenders for tinned meat and so forth for the troops? Very well, then!—you don't s'pose they test the specimens on themselves? No; they pay a man —a 'trier.' And what's he do for his money? As each trial tin is opened, he has to swaller a mouthful o' what's in it, and keep it down. Then he sits down and waits till it gets well into his innards. If he ain't dead in about an hour, well and good—the contract might be accepted. If he shows his feelin's ain't all they might be, back goes the stuff to the contractin' firm with a stiff warnin'. That's all he has to do for his money—besides takin' a thick dose o' med'cine every evenin' to put him right and bring him up to the scratch next mornin'. As I say, you wouldn't find me out o' work for long, if I was a younger feller; and I shouldn't hang round any Labor Exchange, or whatever they call it. Fact of it is, the bloomin' schools nowadays turn a half-baked lot o' kids out into the world. They know jest a snatch of everythin', and feel stuck-up, and all want lily-fingered jobs; 'stead o' which, they all ought to be trained for somethin' special and useful—so many in one pack, and so many in another. What's the consequence? They're all crowdin' round a newspaper in the Free Library,

and all writin' after a clerk's job at ten shillin's a week —to be chucked out of it when they ask for a 'rise.' 'Cause there's thousands waitin' to take their stools at the same money."

"Yes, that's right enough," some one conceded. "There's a lot in what you say there."

"Course there is," he said, strainingly. "Look at me! —I never had any schoolin' whatever. What d'you expect o' schools where they send the kids home to browbeat the old man that Chol—er— Cholmondeley spells Farquharson, or somethin' o' that monkey gibberish? What's it matter if any man *is* fool enough to spell his name inside out as an advertisement?—does that make out that others have got to spell it that way, too? Why, con-found me, there's a niece o' mine—a kid full this high in her socks; what she'll be fit for when she's pushed from school, heaven on'y knows; her old man don't. I see her by accident on'y about a month ago. 'Can you knock up a pie or a dumplin' yet?' I says to her. 'D'you know how to starch and stiffen a man's shirt without rottin' it?' 'No,' she says, right out flat; 'and don't want to.' 'Well,' I says to her old man, 'what's she *goin'* to school for? Has her future husban' got to teach her the housework, or what?' 'Lord knows,' he says. 'I give it up. Here,' he says, 'she gets in one class and starts learnin' French. As soon as she's begun it, almost, she's shifted up into another class, and starts on botany, and somethin' else. And so it goes on. She don't get farther than the beginnin' of anythin'. Children ain't taught to think for theirselves at all,' he says. 'They're jest shoved in rows, and stuffed with all sorts o' things like them Strasburg geese.' And that's just about what they turn out at the finish—stuffed geese. It ain't schoolin' at all. It's a lot o' crammin' to make 'em scramble through examinations, and keep up a horde of Inspectors and what-not on big salaries, that come out o'

the tax-payer's pockets—like everythin' else in this world."

"Well, yes," enlarged another man, as if made to marvel inwardly over his own scholastic record. "Take myself: I was supposed to pass the sixth standard, I know—or it might have been the sixteenth; I ain't sure now. But how I come to do it, or what good it done me, I couldn't tell any one. I know I never prop'ly understood my own 'rithmetic, and I never got the right answer to anything unless the boy in front of me did; and if you'd sliced me alive, the month after I left school I couldn't have told the date of Waterloo or Bunker's Hill."

"Might you know the capital of Middlesex?" some one asked him, very carelessly.

"Well, yes, any fool knows that," he said, with carelessness to match. "You're standing in it, old cocky."

"Thought so," said the other, briefly. "You've never passed no sixth standard. It's Brentford."

"Rot," muttered Mr. Kingdom, secretly astounded at the news.

"Oh, very good," said the other, waving his pipe indifferently. "Makes no odds, 'cept that when I hear any one say 'rot,' I know he's a man who only believes just what he wants to."

"Well, look here," retorted Mr. Kingdom, with a thud on the bar-counter, "if you're so bustin' with cleverness, here's one for you—or any of you. Where's Soho?"

Everybody looked ready to jump at him with a pitying response; but, oddly enough, all hung back, to think it out.

"There you are," said Mr. Kingdom, with triumph. "Not a devil in the bar can say off-hand. And why? Because there *isn't* such a place. It's on'y a name."

"That be blowed for a tale," mustered some one, breaking the general stupor.

Mr. Kingdom chose to ignore him, rather than spoil the cumulative effect.

"There isn't such a place," he reaffirmed. "Now, then! It's on the map, and it's in everyone's mouth; but you can't find it; you can't go to any particular street and say: 'I'm standin' in Soho.' You try it! There's lots o' funny little puzzlers like that in London. It wasn't so long ago since the high-falutin' newspaper-fellers took it in their heads to call the parts round Belgrave Square, 'Belgravia.' Well, it stuck, and now you'll find it on the map, and so forth; but there isn't any such place. You'll hear places talked about every day; but you can't find a man to say he lives there. Why, bust me, I had to go once to collect some money off a feller s'posed to live at Homerton. If I walked one mile, I walked a bloomin' dozen—and never found it. 'Where am I?' I says to one bloke. 'They told me, if I walked right up Dalston Lane, and kept goin' on, I should be in Homerton. What about it?' 'Oh,' he says, 'this 'ere's Hackney. Bend to the right, and you'll come on it.' Well, I bent, and kept on with my bendin'; but d'you think I could strike the blessed place? 'Where am I *now?*' I says to another feller. 'Why,' he says, 'this is Victoria Park. You've got to go back a bit, and bear to the left.' Back I went, and found myself in what they call Lower Clapton. 'Well,' I says to some one else, 'where the so-and-so *is* this Homerton, if you don't mind?'—for I was gettin' a bit wild over it. And, bust me, although he'd lived round there all his life, he couldn't put me on it. 'I know there's a Homerton Infirmary,' the idiot says; 'but I dunno any partic'lar street you'd say was Homerton.' 'Well, then,' I says, 'you ought to be shot, the whole lot of you, for bolsterin' up the name of a place that's been sucked into a dozen

other different parishes, and hasn't got no locus bloomin' standi whatever!' And he couldn't say a word."

"Well, that's only one of the many little mysteries of this life," harked back the sixth-standard man, with an off-hand profundity. "As I say, believe me or not, when I'd been away from school for a year or so, I couldn't say at a pinch where *any* place was, or what was anno domini and what wasn't. All I thought about in them days, was football."

"Good thing, too," chimed in another, purposely forestalling Mr. Kingdom. "I haven't got any boys myself —mine all turned out girls; but if I had, I'd sooner see 'em footballing than filling their brains out with the number o' people in Bombay, or what they eat and drink for a living in Peru. What's it matter, to any one who's never likely to get farther than Margate by the boat? Give boys something to kick, I say—something hard! It's in their blood to do it, and lets off the natural steam. If they can't kick a football, they're almost bound to kick their wives later on. They must kick something; and kick it they will."

"I say! You ought to have been a medical student—a licensed hooligan," was Mr. Kingdom's prompt and forcible retort. "You'd have bull-fightin' brought in again, no doubt, on the grounds that bulls must have somethin' to gore. You're a beauty, I must say. I like to hear some people talk, jest to hear their own clack."

"Meaning me?" demanded the other, rather shakily.

"Meanin' you!" confirmed Mr. Kingdom, his putty-hued complexion mottling a little. "What about it?"

"'Sh!" said the barmaid brightly, leaning across to tap his shoulder. "You don't mind it being Christmas, do you, Mr. Kingdom?"

CHAPTER XV

AT six o'clock on Christmas Eve, Gideon Westaway—a little more cadaverous, a little more Mephistophelian than ever—stood alone in the kitchen, looking around him, speculating as to the most dramatic results to be got from a full box of matches he had found.

His forenoon he had spent in the more crowded streets, watching for fruit to roll from stalls accidently knocked, and following laden shoppers in the hope that they might drop something eatable or saleable; and sufficient had been obtained in this way to serve for breakfast and dinner combined. The greater portion of the afternoon had been occupied by a game at "real Indians" on the stairs with the boy from the floor above—culminating in a genuine fight from which Gideon, being able to use his teeth as well as his hands and heels, had emerged a conspicuous victor. The boy's mother had twisted his ears and flung him down the lower flight of stairs with a threat of something ghastly and final if he ever dared to mount them again; but as this occurred on an average once a week, Gideon accepted the situation with complacency. One happy peculiarity about Gideon Westaway was that, if circumstances compelled it, he could entertain himself alone for hours at a stretch.

With no sense of cold isolation—utterly detached from the busy world ringing him about — he had prowled around the kitchen and scullery. Nearly an hour had been exhausted in endeavoring to entice a cat outside to come inside; but that animal—maybe remembering for-

mer original experiments at his hands — successfully resisted all blandishments. Gideon was disappointed, because he had intended to discover (*a*) how long the cat could keep sane with a cotton flour-bag tied tightly over its head, and (*b*) how much fat-soaked sponge it could eat before it paid the penalty, as the sponge swelled within; but he was looking confidently around for some other means of satisfying his research. He had lit the small lamp, and calculated that there was sufficient oil in its reservoir to last him a couple of hours.

Peering in corners, he was successful in finding two or three spiders entrenched for the "off" season behind layers of flue and web; but these, being dormant and sluggish, afforded no real sport, scarcely moving as their legs were nipped one by one from their bodies. With a soft little "Ha!" of expectancy, Gideon pounced upon a large blue-bottle which had survived the mild winter so far, and which, disturbed, was feebly traversing a remnant of curtain above the window. At least, he did not pounce literally, being too expert: he climbed on the table, armed with a cup, and carefully shepherded the blue-bottle on to its back in the cup. A very narrow escape from capsizing the frail oil-lamp, as he climbed down again, left him scarcely perturbed.

"Now, then," he murmured.

The blue-bottle, placed upon the table, and seeming to scent mischief, traveled hither and thither in sharp little bursts, but apparently had forgotten the use of its wings.

"Try that," whispered Gideon, as he applied a lighted match, burned off one wing, and clapped the cup quickly over his victim.

The blue-bottle, taken by surprise, made a turbulent zim-zim-zimming inside its prison for a while; and then, as if resorting to artifice, became still. Cautiously Gideon lifted the cup, approached his prey from behind

with another lighted match, and dexterously burned off the other wing. The big fly was now quite at his mercy. "Silly fool," murmured Gideon.

Goaded into a liveliness that came too late, it darted to and fro over the table like a thing possessed—a little too rapidly, indeed, for Gideon's liking. Watching his chance, he turned it upon its back, and, before the thing could right itself, scorched off its legs without actually injuring its body. This was the exciting point which Gideon anticipated from experience. The blue-bottle spun round and round upside down with the swiftness of a catherine-wheel in full gyration, apparently unable to stop, and giving out a frantic buzz which quite drowned the muffled hum of all outer sounds. For several minutes, occasionally spurred by the approach of a fresh lighted match, it maintained this interesting performance, and then seemed to yield to a sense of hopelessness. Gideon's ingenuity was not exhausted, however. He sprang to the cupboard, to look for pepper. There was no pepper there—had not been any for months; but he recollected a fragment of snuff in an old box on the mantel-shelf. This he sprinkled over the remnant of the blue-bottle, and actually succeeded in galvanizing it into a fresh series of antics. Then at last, after an inert movement or so, it became quite still; and no lighted matches could goad it into any further betrayal of life.

Quite satisfied, and with only a little sigh of regret for the ending, Gideon straightened up from the table. As he did so, he heard a dull little sound as of a chair being knocked over in the bedroom—the room two or three paces up the passage, on the right.

This, his first intimation that anybody was "at home" besides himself, occasioned him a mild surprise; but the effect was only temporary. As he slept on two chairs in the kitchen himself, he had little or no interest in

the other apartment; he told himself that his mother was either just "getting up" or had just come in and dropped across the bed as she was—both events being so likely as to cause no wonderment.

He went on with his prowling until he heard the raised voice of the woman next door calling to some one to hurry up, as it was half-past seven. As he had arranged to meet another boy about that time, for a series of sorties down the Row—thereby filling his own "stocking" for midnight consumption—he burned the rest of his matches in a bunch, and made for the street. As he passed the bedroom door on the right, it occurred to him to snatch just a glance inside, and gauge the domestic portents for the evening.

He turned the handle quietly, and pushed. The door resisted—not solidly, but as if some one within held a reluctantly yielding hand against the panels. Giving a fresh push, and maintaining a gap of a few inches that he gained, Gideon worked his head inside, and twisted his neck to see around the room, in which burned feebly a penny glass oil-lamp. . . . Of a sudden he let the door swing back again, gave the twist of an eel under the knife, rolled like a ball along the passage a little way, shot up, and, with his mouth gaping wide, sprang for the street door. Just as he reached it, some one bumped heavily against it on the outer side.

"Out o' the way!" panted Tilly, as he flung it open. "Let me in, do!" she laughed, just a trifle hysterically, her face aglow, her arms full of small parcels ready to drop. "Where are you, all of you? My word, what a scurry—hullo!"

He had darted crouchingly past her, and, without a word or glance, was gone.

"Well, that's all right!" she ejaculated, staring down the street after him. "I must say! What's he been up to *now?*"

She left the door ajar, advanced on to the kitchen, and stood gazing blankly around it. Just what she had expected to find—whether she had persuaded herself that, on dear old Christmas Eve itself, things would be a little exceptional even here—she seemed scarcely to know herself. But the silence of the bare room, with its odor of burnt blue-bottle, appeared to strike a definite chill into her at the very outset. She dropped her parcels to the table in a heap, and sank down on to the edge of the nearest chair, her lips set, her hands trembling a little upon her lap.

And so, for a matter of several minutes, she remained, partly incredulous, partly dazed—waiting.

Then, as with a physical effort, she got up.

"As usual—silly me!" she whispered to herself. "*Is* it Christmas?—*am* I here?—or what?"

By glancing sideways through the kitchen window, one could see whether or not there was any light in the other room—up the passage on the right. Tilly glanced, and saw that there was.

"Oh, p'raps there *is* some one at home, after all," she said, less depressedly. "What a lot they are!—why ain't I like it myself? I wonder whatever Alice would think of it—a home to rush out of, not into!"

She went to the other door. "Mother!" she called, low but sharply. "You there? Any one there? Here's Tilly."

No answer; so she simply made to walk in, by the force of old habit. To her surprise the door bumped back against her, as if on a self-closing spring.

"Eh, what?" she said to herself, giving another push, just as Gideon had done. Back it came, and clicked into place again. . . . She would never quite forget this moment of tentative hesitation, because just then the Salvation Army procession, which every evening forged its way up the Row in the teeth of the traffic, signaled its

approach with an exceptionally stirring burst of band music:

> "Lo, He comes, with clouds descending!
> Prince of . . ."

"Mother!" called Tilly, with almost a resentful sob. "It's me! What are you up to in there?"

No answer. She gave one more determined pressure, and—just as Gideon had done—worked her head inside, and gazed around. . . . Of a sudden she stumbled convulsively back, with clasped hands, her face turned upward, and her breast heaving as if for the breath of air that would save her from instant suffocation.

"Oh, God!—God! . . . Oh, my God above me! . . . Oh, God!—God!—God!"

The call left her lips slowly, distinctly, but not with her own knowledge. Her face drooped again, framed by her gripping hands. She stood, gazing at the closed door, her lips moving still, but now soundlessly. Then, feeling along the wall for a support, she dragged herself by degrees to the street door, and got it open, as if only praying that the physical collapse might overtake her on the outer side of it.

But the collapse did not come. She trembled violently for a minute, as the cool air fanned in past her; and then, still as without her own knowledge, she seemed to make an almost incredible effort, and kept back altogether the series of wild cries that had been gathering in her throat.

"I'm calm!—I'm calm!" she whispered. "I'm not going to be ill—I won't!"

She set off down the street, very slowly at first, and like one whose feet were stiff with cramp—but gaining speed, and able to think just a little, as she reached the Row. The wave of sound here was stunning, but she heard nothing of it—or only a droning sound as of

myriad bees swarming at a distance. Seeing no faces, but just feeling her way mechanically through the mass of people, she came out into the main road—into the comparatively quiet and lifeless section of it. Only a few minutes had elapsed when she found herself beating with both hands upon Mr. Kingdom's shop-door.

It was fastened, and the shop within was deserted. She seemed to grasp the meaning of this at once, and moved on to the side-door, and pulled the bell, and beat with her hands again.

Presently there was a sound of slippered feet. The door opened, and little Mrs. Kingdom, her head becking and her face prepared to smile, looked out at her.

"I think I know you. To be sure, it's——" piped little Mrs. Kingdom. She stopped, because of the great gasp that broke, and the way in which her hands were clutched.

"Don't—don't! Bob! Is he here? I want him—I want him—only him!"

And, just as it was to be, down the stairs beyond at a leisurely pace came Bob Kingdom, still munching the last of his evening meal, and with his cap on, ready for his casual stroll.

"Bob!—Mr. Kingdom!" With a sob Tilly sprang at him, and grasped his hands in turn; then cowered, her teeth chattering as with cold. "Don't ask!" she whispered, with dry lips. "Don't ask a word—come!"

Bob Kingdom's jaws stopped moving. He looked at her—then at his mother—and seemed inclined to be dense and awkward. Then he said, laconically:

"All right! It's all right! . . . It's all right!" he repeated aside to his mother. "Shut the door."

It was typical of Bob Kingdom that he refrained from a single question as he moved along beside Tilly. Once or twice he glanced askance down at her, and seemed to be thinking very deeply; but that was all. He made

a way for her with his big body up the Row, and then allowed Tilly to precede him along Porter Street.

Number Eleven door stood open—apparently just as she had left it. Tilly paused a second, staring up the uncarpeted staircase, as if she feared that some one might be about to descend from the floors above; then she caught at his sleeve, and drew him on with a spasm of strength, and pointed to that door.

"In there! In there!"

She shrank away at once, her eyes closed, her hands to her ears. Afterwards, she could tell herself that he stood just a moment, reflecting—and then tried the lock. But at the moment she followed no actual details. She bent there, her head turned, and only seemed to be waiting for some great sound to burst—such as a crash of thunder. And the effect of the strain—brief or prolonged—was beneficial. It deadened sensibility. She was like one who had slept and dreamed and was not fully awake, when he stepped out and touched her.

"It's all over," he said. She could not see his face properly, but it looked to be a little yellow, and he was wiping his forehead slowly. "Better come, eh?—come and look at him—before——"

"Yes, Bob—yes!" she whispered, catching at his fingers. And, if he heard, he did not seem to think there was anything strange just then in her use of his name again.

"Should keep quiet—just for a minute—until——" he advised, in the same unfinished but understood way.

"Yes, Bob—yes!"

Bob Kingdom went in first and stepped aside, his head drooped, his cap lifted a little, a tremor now and then recurring through his big form. Tilly, feeling that she was still in the grip of the dream, crept on a little farther, and stood looking down, her body almost as stiff and unresponsive as the one over which she bent.

"Yes, my dear father! Yes, father!" she said, her voice almost rapt in its steadiness. "Don't grieve any more. Tilly knows!—and p'raps God knows!"

Bob Kingdom had done his utmost. The last of James Westaway had been lifted upon the bed, the limbs at ease, the hands folded, and a handkerchief wound around his neck. What it might have cost Bob to do it, was something that no one thought to ask.

The hush of accepted death and eternal farewell seemed already settling down. Tilly turned without a trace of the vehemence of realization.

"Gone! . . . Must we—couldn't we keep them from knowing . . . how. . . ."

"Couldn't," answered Bob Kingdom, as firmly as possible. "Will you wait where you are—or will you——?"

"You go," whispered Tilly. "P'raps I can bear it—I'd rather. Be quick!"

She placed her hands upon her father's, and closed her eyes, as Bob Kingdom turned. It seemed to her that he was back in the room again almost at once. And, indeed, he had only gone to the street door, beckoned to the nearest woman, and muttered something brief.

"Better come away, eh?" he said, taking her arm.

"No—no," said Tilly. "It's the last moment I shall see him—as he was. Let me be with him—with him—till they come."

The buzz of talk grew and grew in the street outside. It subsided for an instant, as the street door opened again, and a heavy tramp of feet sounded in the passage. Tilly shook, but stood her ground, and gazed round with ilmed eyes at the two policemen who had tried to enter he room quietly. They gave one flash of their lanterns lown at the bed, one look at her, and then beckoned Bob Kingdom aside. There were nods, and pointings, nd hasty scribblings in notebooks.

"Doctor been?"—in an undertone.

"Never thought of it," said Bob Kingdom. "Saw it was too late."

"Better fetch one—for the look of it. Always have to."

One of the policemen tiptoed hastily out. The other stood respectfully on guard, looking around at the walls.

"Trouble?" he queried.

"No work," replied Bob Kingdom. "Played out; gave in."

"Ah, yes!" said the officer deeply.

The noise in the street outside grew and grew. It subsided again presently. Tilly heard a running fire of encouraging murmurs, as the front door opened once more—"Ah, poor thing, comes to all of us in the long run!" "Stand back, there—give the poor creature room to breathe!" "Might have happened to you or me instead—you never know." Tilly realized, and started away from the bed, her hands put up as if to ward off a blow. Bob Kingdom came to himself just in time to catch hold of her and steer her clear of the room and along to the kitchen.

Mrs. Westaway had been found. A series of long-drawn, shuddering moans told it. They were leading her in like a martyr to the stake, her black hair loose, her deathly face turned upward, her mind practically a blank, her lips giving out the passionate contrition by instinct alone. As if the last link in the chain of circumstances had been fitted, the neighbors flocked in after her, and in a moment the small bedroom was crowded, and the house a hive of sound. . . . From that point Tilly knew no more—wished to know no more—until, somehow or other, she found herself out in the quiet stretch of the main road again, with Bob Kingdom's arm awkwardly all around her.

CHAPTER XVI

"BIT better?" queried Bob Kingdom, halting as though doubtful about the next step required in the circumstances.

Tilly did not answer. She knew his voice, and could recognize her surroundings; but that was all. All she seemed to want was, to slip away into a long, long sleep. Bob Kingdom was intuitive enough to tell himself that, if he relaxed his hold, she might simply sink down on the spot, temporarily beyond caring what happened. That would hardly do.

After a moment's knotty reflection, aided by a rummaging in the hair under his cap, he said "H'm, ha!" to himself, and drew her on. Taking a key from his pocket, he unlocked the shop side-door, lifted her in, and closed the door again. Little Mrs. Kingdom, startled by a slow stumbling sound on her stairs, ran to the upper landing and peered down—perhaps with the thought that her husband had returned home unusually early with a reason.

"Deary me! Deary me!" she whispered, as Bob Kingdom fairly carried his burden up the second short flight. "Give me a minute—I must turn up the gas. Deary me!"

Like her son, she was not one to ask questions, but seemed to take things for granted as they occurred. With many shakings of her small silvery head, she dragged up a low armchair to the fire, and held Tilly's skirts down as he plumped her into it. Then she flitted round and round the room, until she had found a certain

bottle, and sprinkled part of the contents upon Tilly's forehead.

"Oh!" moaned Tilly, her eyes half unclosing for a moment. "Oh! Kind!—Kind!"

Bob Kingdom wiped his own forehead, and looked down at her from behind very uncertainly.

"Drop o' brandy do any good?" he suggested. "Seems to want something. Bad upset."

"I don't think so; no, I wouldn't give her anything of that," said Mrs. Kingdom, in her natural hushed voice. Bending, she had observed that Tilly's eyelids fluttered, and her nostrils twitched. "I think we'll leave her quite still as she is for a while, and then try what a cup of tea will do. If she's not used to it, anything of that might set her screaming. A glass of ale won't hurt *you* for once."

Bob Kingdom stalked slowly to a cupboard, and poured himself out a glass, gazing at it as if it were medicine. Then he dropped into a chair, and looked very hard at the floor.

"What, can't you hold the glass?" breathed his mother, hurrying across. "Here, let me rub your hands; they've gone dead."

"Rub hers," he muttered, nodding toward the fireplace. "Might have to get her back to Highbury before eleven. Mustn't go back *there,* anyway—not to-night—not as she is. Rough show. Not fit."

"It's the girl Westaway—the one who wrote you those long letters—isn't it? I somehow thought so, at a glance!"

"That's the one," he admitted, letting his head bump back against the wall. "Shouldn't let her know you read 'em. Natty little thing. Bad upset to-night. Bad—bad!"

"Well, don't tell me," trembled little Mrs. Kingdom. "If it's anything I can't bear to hear, don't tell me.

Thank goodness, you're back safe out of it, that's all I say. Bless her heart, she looks all anyhow, don't she? Highbury, do you say?"

"That's the place. Means her money. But p'raps get her to have something to eat first. Feel very—very empty myself. Had my tea, didn't I?"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Kingdom, anxiously. "I don't want to know, but whatever can have happened? There, sit still; p'raps you'd better not touch the ale. Here's the piece of pie you left——"

"No pie—no pie!" he said, with a heave of his great chest. "Make the tea, and put a dry biscuit beside it. No pie!"

A little later Tilly's eyes unclosed again. Without stirring, she looked around the room—the big room over the shop and passage, rather stuffy, and containing a lot of old-fashioned horse-hair chairs and couches.

"I can't go home," she said aloud slowly, as if answering herself. "I couldn't go home. It's no use, mother; I can't help you to-night. I can't face you—not to-night."

"You just keep quiet, dearie—keep quiet!" warned Mrs. Kingdom, with a return rush in that direction. "This is quite home enough for the time being, if you like to make it so. You're not upsetting any one here; and you needn't say a word about it, I'm sure."

Still without moving, Tilly looked up into her eyes.

"Yes," she said, calmly, but half unconsciously, as they could tell. "You're a dear, kind old soul. I always thought you were. I knew you must be, because of Bob. Bob came with me—Bob came with me! My own mother—wasn't there!"

"I think you'd better go out," whispered Mrs. Kingdom hurriedly to the staring Bob. "She's beginning to come round, and she's got too big a heart for her body,

you can see. Go out into the fresh air, and come back in a little while. Think out what's to be done."

Bob rose slowly, and glanced at his watch—looking, undeniably, as if he really needed both a mental and a physical spur.

"What about you? Shops not open to-morrow. Know how we're going on? Anything wanted in the house?"

"Well, if there is, and I haven't got it, I must put up with the bother, that's all," she declared. "Your father brought in a goose at the last moment; he always does, although he knows I daren't touch a mouthful of it; but anything does for me, as long as he's satisfied."

"Got any apples?" Bob was sufficiently himself to ask. "Can't do without apples."

"Bring some in, then—and your onions, too. Oh, and you might bring a few parsnips; your father'll carry on dreadful if there's no parsnips with it. Here, you'd better take a bag."

"No bag," he said. "Pockets do; parsnips in this one—others in that. Goose, eh?" he paused at the door to repeat, after another look at Tilly. "No, don't think I can touch it, either—not this time. Bring in a bit o' rump steak—you and me."

"Now, dearie!" said little Mrs. Kingdom, with great cheerfulness, as she bent over Tilly again. "Anything you feel you want to tell me?—Any one you'd like to send to? We're all by ourselves in the room; it's all right!"

Tilly groped for her hands.

"I do like Bob!" she said, with the first approach to a sob. "I do think it was wonderful. You tell him—when I'm gone; I can't—I mustn't."

"He's a great big baby," declared Mrs. Kingdom, to check the outburst.

"No, he's not," said Tilly, faintly. "You know he's *not*. He's a man. The best men never look what they

are—no more than the worst do; I've found it out. Why—why don't women see deeper than a man's looks and clothes? . . . Yes, I've got one friend. She'd come to me at once, if she could, I know, and help me back. You'll find—you'll find a letter with her address in my under pocket, if you'll take it out. Send to her for me —yes; p'raps he could telegraph somehow; I oughtn't to be here like this, I know."

Mrs. Kingdom found the letter, looked at the address, and stood with a sad little face, thinking. Presently she wiped her eyes.

"Don't take any notice of me, dearie! It cuts me to hear anybody say they know they oughtn't to be here—that's all; because, if it only rested with me, any one in trouble should be sure of a comforting word here. But thank God for giving me a good son, to make up for it. They do tell me it's unnatural that I've never had an hour's worry or lost a night's sleep over him, he being a man—and that he can't be sound in his head, because he doesn't give way to himself as other men seem to do; but how that can be, I don't know. Never mind! Now, dearie, do you think this friend of yours will think you're fit to go back there to-night—to Highbury, or wherever it is? I go out so little myself, you know, that to me it sounds like a foreign part."

"I must," said Tilly, who was very white, and spoke with difficulty. "You dear old soul, I know what you're thinking; but I must. I've got no home—not now; I mustn't lose my 'place,'—or I'd be in the streets. And that—that *would* seem the last straw."

"Now, now, don't start shivering," begged Mrs. Kingdom, earnestly. "Put your arms around my neck, and shut your teeth, and keep it off. It's all so terrible to-night, isn't it?—And yet, just when you feel it's gone dark for good, up comes a little light again, and it grows and grows——"

" 'Count your blessings,' eh?" cried Tilly, with a great gulp. "Yes—yes—don't let me think it's all true yet! Bring Alice—bring Alice!"

Her clinging arms relaxed, her head dipped forward, and she lay a dead weight upon the little woman's shoulder. Bob Kingdom, returning sooner than he was expected, stood staring at the passivity of the picture in place of the improvement he had been led to expect.

"Fainted off," whispered his mother. "Keep where you are. Think what's to be done, before she comes to. She's not fit to stir out two yards—that's certain."

Bob Kingdom pondered, as he drew three large parsnips from his pocket, followed by steak, onions and apples. Then he said, in his casual way:

"All right. My bed. Lock the door."

"What—? And what will you do then?"

He scratched the back of his neck abstractedly.

"Won't matter. Can come in a bit late with my key; drop off on the sofa. Get her away early. No one up early to-morrow—Christmas. Eh?"

There was a little more uncertain whispering between them—based evidently upon the unmentioned fact that the temperamental peculiarities of Mr. Kingdom senior had to be taken carefully into account in all circumstances. Then Bob advanced, worked his arms under Tilly, waited while his mother spread a handkerchief over her eyes, and then carried her up the next flight of stairs as simply and easily as he carried up his clean towels and underlinen every Saturday evening. Down upon his own bed he laid her.

"That's all right," he said, with some relief. "What's this?"

He had been going to retreat, and found the letter thrust into his hands.

"Her friend's address—the one she calls Alice," breathed little Mrs. Kingdom, pushing him out before

she took the handkerchief from Tilly's eyes. "I don't know what you'll do, or how you'll manage it; but at a time like this you can't stop to think. 'Bring Alice!' —that's the last word I could get out of her. And, you see, I can't very well stop in the room with her all night. If it's too late to telegraph, or anything of that, you must *go*."

Bob Kingdom's jaw fell a little as the door closed upon him, and there was considerable rummaging in his hair before he could seem to grasp the proposition. Then, feeling the cold a little more than usual, he put on an overcoat, and set out. He noted with a sort of dull surprise, as he went along, that, instead of being near midnight, it was only twenty past nine.

CHAPTER XVII

PRESENTLY, having had time to pull himself together, Bob Kingdom halted, and boarded a motor-bus bound for Bishopsgate. "Might as well do the two things at once, while I'm about it. Got to be done somehow," he had said to himself.

Turning into Broad Street terminus, he made an inquiry, and was fortunate enough to find his train waiting. It was still on the right side of ten o'clock as he stepped out from quiet little Canonbury Station—into different air—within two or three minutes' walk of Tilly's "place."

Reaching it, he gazed up at the house with a little curiosity—and a man who, from the opposite pavement, had apparently been doing the same thing, moved on a little way into the darkness. Then, mounting the steps, Bob Kingdom gave a single knock upon the hall door.

This was flung back with a disconcerting quickness.

"Look here!" said a voice that trembled as with long-suppressed indignation. "I don't know what you mean by it, but I term it disgraceful, and shall take steps to stop it. No, she is not here! For you to come whistling and lounging outside my residence in this manner——"

"Me?" said Bob Kingdom mildly, as she broke off short.

"Oh, I beg your pardon—perhaps I have made a mistake," Tilly's mistress faltered, looking the caller up and down in dismay. "Really, I—I made sure that the person who comes whistling here to my maid, had had the insolence to knock; in fact, I was waiting for it. I'm

sorry, I'm sure—! Of course, I can see now you are not Tilly's young man."

"Young man?" repeated Bib Kingdom. "Got a young man, has she? Didn't know that." He remained gazing, as if he had forgotten what he had called to inform her.

Tilly's mistress, recollecting herself, had drawn back with some reserve.

"Have *you* an acquaintance with my maid, then?" she inquired, rather dubiously. "I don't quite——"

"Tilly—yes," he muttered, prompted. "Thought I'd just let you know she's not quite the thing, and mightn't be 'in' to-night. Left her round at my place. Bit of an upset, like."

Tilly's mistress looked very hard into space, and then moved courageously to the top step to get a closer, clearer view of him.

"What's that?" she asked, incredulously. "Is this some message from Tilly?—not 'in' to-night? What does she mean? Round at *your* place——?"

"That's it," he said, studying her general appearance obliquely in turn. "No go, I'm afraid. Shook her up. Lost her father rather sudden and unawares, like."

"*Lost* him?"

"Well, you know,"—with a jerk of his head that he seemed to think explained the whole thing. "Bit sad. Passed away before anything could be done. Thought we'd better let her stay as she was for the night—round at my place. Got to let her friend know. Rum Christmas all round, eh? G'night!"

And he turned and went off, leaving Tilly's mistress as stony-still on the top step as though she had petrified.

A few minutes more, and, his thick lips parted, he was gazing up at the red-lit first-floor windows of another house, the number of which tallied with that on the letter he held. As there were no lights on the ground

floor, he was not quite certain whether the illumination above meant that the inmates had gone to bed. However, when Bob Kingdom had an errand in hand, he was pretty reliable. He knocked; and presently the door opened two inches.

"What's for you?" inquired some one—the woman downstairs. She was "up"; it was merely that she economized in her gas-bill. "Oh, no; quite right—I'm not Mrs. Richards. You might give two knocks and wait, please." And she closed the door again in a way that signified strained relations—due to the fact that her tenants above had so obstinately preferred to "keep quite to themselves in everything."

Bob Kingdom, saying "One—two!" to himself as a precaution, gave the required signal, and stood square to meet another chilly reception. But this time, as the door went softly back, quite a different face looked out at him—sweet and wistful and womanly. This, Bob Kingdom's first sight of Alice Richards, took a front place in his memory.

"For me?" Alice Richards asked. "Do I know you?" —as if she had a vague idea that he fitted some frame in her mind.

"Know Tilly, I believe," he replied, his eye upon an inner door that had opened slightly as to allow some one to listen. And Alice's quick echo—"Tilly? Oh, yes!"—left no room for doubt. He felt a little at a loss this time as to how to break his news, and took off his cap and looked deeply inside it for an idea. "Mind stepping outside just a moment?" he asked, at last.

And Alice obeyed, and put her slim, pale hand upon his sleeve at once.

"Yes, I think I know you—Tilly has told me of you," she said. "If anything is wrong, tell me at once, please."

And Bob Kingdom drew a breath and started. He had quite intended to make certain tactful reservations,

but, as he felt the hand lightening upon his arm, and the light in Alice's eyes searching him, he went on and on in spite of himself, until all had been told—until Alice stood back, with her hand pressed to her breast.

"Thank you for coming," was all she whispered, presently; "and thank God for your helping hand to our Tilly to-night. I must go to her at once—yes."

She stood awhile, hesitating considerably over it, as it appeared to Bob Kingdom—but in reality balancing woman's devotion against woman's duty. Then she drew Bob gently inside, and flitted away up the stairs. It seemed to Bob Kingdom that that inner door had opened slightly quite a dozen times, to let some one peer out at him, before she rustled down again, in her cloak and hat, and was pressing his arm again almost imploringly.

"I'm in a little difficulty," he heard. "You say you have given Tilly your room? Don't think it strange if I ask—would you make use of ours in return? I mean, I did not care to tell my husband all; would you remain here with him and keep him company—until I can get back? If not——"

"Me? Why not?" Bob Kingdom muttered, with the look of one to whom nothing could seem strange to-night. "Stay all night, if you can't; makes no odds to me what I do, now it's come to it. No need to worry about that. Don't suppose I should sleep anyhow. That's all right. You go; think about that afterwards."

"Thank you—thank you," Alice said softly again, as if a weight had slipped from her mind. "I told him you would—I somehow felt I had not made a mistake. You see, he has been so ill; I thought it best to say nothing more than that Tilly is unwell at your home, and wishes to see me. You understand!"

Bob Kingdom stared at the wall, until he had conscientiously grasped the difficulty.

"I see," he nodded. "Me say nothing, eh? Best not, eh, Right you are—best for you to be with her than me. You'll take a taxi from Broad Street—be there quick; I'll pay that. You'll find the house——"

"Write it down, if you will," whispered Alice, resolutely calm as she drew on her gloves. "It's late now, and I mustn't make any mistake. Tell me just what to do, and I'll do it."

Bob Kingdom found a pencil and wrote it thickly, laboriously, across her own letter. It was safe to assume, from experience, that long before twelve o'clock Mr. Kingdom senior would be deep in sleep.

"That's it—no mistake about that." He had underlined "side-door." "You just knock quietly at that, and they'll be waiting; no fear about that. I wouldn't worry or hurry."

"I won't," said Alice. She had pressed his hand again as with intuitive gratitude, and was at the door. "You can go on up—he'll be so glad—good-bye! If I don't get back in time——"

"If you don't, you don't," Bob Kingdom finished for her; and the door clicked. "That's done it; I'm booked," he added to himself stolidly.

Starting up the stairs, he came to a door past which the warm red light was streaming. Perhaps he had been picturing a fretful invalid supine in there: he was a little startled to find, instead, a man leaping forward from his chair with outstretched hand and a greeting smile.

"Come on in; sit down," said Victor Richards, as heartily if he had known him years at least. "Going to keep me company, are you? Poor little woman, she didn't seem to like at all the idea of leaving me alone on Christmas Eve. All the same, I call it a very chummy feeling on your part to offer to stay a bit."

Bob Kingdom shook hands, sank into the proffered

chair, and looked around. The point about "offering" happened to escape him at the moment.

"That's all right," he said, pushing his cap into his pocket. "Felt a bit knocked up myself, what with one thing and another—had a busy day of it all round, I mean. Glad she's with Tilly. Couldn't do much there myself."

"It's nothing serious, I hope?" queried Victor Richards, as he slid across the little tobacco-pouch which Alice never allowed to become quite empty.

"Oh, no," Bob Kingdom assured him, off-hand. "But hysterical, like—that's all. Didn't seem to have any other friend to turn to at a pinch. Thought I might as well run over."

Victor Richards lit his pipe, and looked intently into the fire as he gave out little puffs of smoke. He had already formed a swift and sufficient estimate of Bob Kingdom as a man, and did not object to Bob gazing at him with an unintentional fixity. Bob Kingdom, in turn, was slowly summing him up as a very good-looking and very gentlemanly party.

"Good of you," Victor said. "Poor Tilly! 'Go at once; never mind anything else,' I said to the wife. Why, we think the world of Tilly; we can't help it. And I seem to know you quite well, hearing of you from Tilly."

"Know her young man?" blurted Bob, rather abruptly. And Victor gazed back at him, ready to smile.

"Young man?—Tilly's young man? No, that I don't. First time I've heard that she had one. Has she?"

"Seems so," reflected Bob Kingdom. "Heard somebody say he was about somewhere—couldn't say myself. Kept it pretty quiet, if she has."

"Very," agreed the other, thoughtfully. "I shall take it upon myself to say that it's a mistake; or *we* should have heard of him. Yes, old chap, I'm sure, now I

come to think—that's quite a fairy tale. . . . You don't smoke?"

"Well, not over and above often," confessed Bob, who had been known occasionally to purchase a clay pipe and a penny packet of tobacco, and to leave them on the pavement about ten minutes later for some one to pick up.

"I see. Wish you did," said Victor. "I should feel more comfortable——"

"That's all right. Got these," replied Bob, drawing two large apples from his pocket. He set his teeth in one, for company's sake, and looked around him again, still somewhat at a loss to account for the position in which he found himself. "Like books?" he queried, nodding toward an open one on the table. He had already noted a well-stacked book-case in the corner.

"Books? Ah, you'd better not ask," said Victor, in his quiet way. "I read a great deal, I suppose. Perhaps I ought not to, as I did too much reading and studying at one time, and helped myself to a nervous breakdown. Do you?"

"Well—middling," said Bob Kingdom carefully, his sole experience on a lengthy scale being confined to the first half of *Robinson Crusoe*. "Now and again, like. Good story?"—with another nod table-wards.

"Very clever," Victor told him, reaching out for the volume. "Not a story—it's a bundle of essays, bound up with a play or two. Know it at all?"

Bob Kingdom gazed. "Never heard of it," he owned, quite truthfully. "Bit above me, I reckon. Good man at it, is he?"

"Well, yes; and something more than that," Victor said. "He would be considered the greatest wit and satirist of to-day—and one of the greatest playwrights—and a host of other things besides. Yes, I read all I can get of his work, and re-read it, and thoroughly

enjoy it. And yet, mind you, I can never lay down a volume or an article of his without thinking him a writer who has sacrificed sincerity for originality. You understand me!"

"I see," said Bob Kingdom, not to be done. "Runs past himself, like. Anything to sell the stuff, eh? Often wondered why a lot of 'em don't work for their living, instead o' turning out these fancy books by the dozen. S'pose somebody reads 'em, though, or they wouldn't do it."

Victor Richards bit hard at his pipe-stem, to keep back the smile. He could appreciate this better than the most cultured criticism, odd as it seemed.

"Ah!" he observed. "It wouldn't do to know all the ins and out, would it? I shouldn't be surprised, I mean, if some of them find it the hardest work for a living you could think of. One manages to catch the public eye, and the other never can—and there you are! See Tilly often?" he broke off to inquire.

"Me?" Bob Kingdom thought it out, as he slowly munched his apple—unrelished, for once. "Well, no; only now and again, just by accident, like. Did happen to take a day off Tuesday; went with her as far as the 'Overflow'——"

"The—what?" The pipe-stem clicked between Victor Richard's teeth, as he stared. "The—what?" he repeated.

Bob Kingdom stared back. "What she calls it, ain't it?—place where they put her young brother out o' the way. Thought so!"

"Ah, yes—yes—I forgot." Victor drew in a deep breath, and closed his eyes tightly for an instant as if to shut out a picture. "For the moment I really forgot —you gave me quite a start." He laid down the pipe. "There, what does it matter—now? You knew, of course, that I've not been long out of the place myself?"

No, Bob Kingdom had not known; his expression—if nothing else—showed it. Indeed, he looked round him as if not quite certain whether he was awake or between blankets.

"What's that?" he mustered at length. "You?—out o' the 'Overflow'? Don't mean it. . . . What for?" he had to finish, as the other man sat so dreamily absorbed.

"What for?" He made an effort to rouse, and stirred the fire into a blaze. "What was I 'in' for, you mean? Well, I couldn't properly tell you, if I tried. Something wrong here for the time being, I suppose,"—touching his forehead lightly. "It's of no consequence now—only I made sure Tilly would have told you that much."

"Never a word—not that I know of," breathed Bob, with the nearest thing to a gasp he could produce. "Can't believe it; can't take it in."

"Don't try to," said Victor, quietly. "It's a simple fact, that we're going to forget; and there's an end of it. Yes, I knew her brother Jimmy quite well, of course—as well as he would allow any one to know him, that is. Poor old Jimmy!"

"Never come out of it, eh?" muttered Bob Kingdom in what seemed a semi-stupor. "Booked for good, eh?"

"Well, I wouldn't tell Tilly what I think, and I won't tell you," decided Victor, after reflection. "Let her keep her hopes, as long as she can. He's got a better chance there than he might have anywhere else. I'm grateful enough for all they did for me—although I couldn't feel it that way at the time, of course. In some of those places—at least, in two others where I was placed for a time——" He shivered slightly, and felt out for his pipe again.

"That so?" asked Bob Kingdom slowly, as with intuition. "S'pose it is. Queer goings-on, eh?"

"Ay; things that you and I are not going to talk about

—not to-night. The attendants are only human, I suppose, and sometimes come to the end of their tether—and there you are; the patients that give them trouble soon have to know what that means. . . . No, I mustn't talk about it."

"Think o' something else," suggested Bob Kingdom, stifling his own lively curiosity. "Wish yourself a merry Christmas."

"And it's in!—hark!" Victor Richards rose, listening, his eyes shining like a child's. "Yes, it's in—there go the bells and the hooters—five to twelve!" He bit his under lip hard, and stood silent for an instant, and then put out his hand, smiling. "I wasn't in my home this time last year—that's all. Wish me luck, for Alice's sake!"

"Luck!" said Bob Kingdom, as he looked at the hand, rose in turn, and grasped it. "Luck all round!"

"To you—to Tilly—to every one we know, or don't know—Amen!" said Victor Richards.

. . . . . .

"No, Tilly—no!" Alice Richards was saying at that moment—so earnestly that there was a danger of its penetrating the heavy dreams of Mr. Kingdom in a bedroom beneath. "No, no, dear!"—as she bent above the face buried stubbornly in Bob Kingdom's pillow, and resolutely gripped the clenching hands. "God is not cruel—no, no! Out of death, life; out of darkness, light—yes! Remember!—Remember now all your wonder, your worship, for the work and lives of the 'Brave poor things!' God knows that here—not in name, but in all truth—breathes and hopes and tries a brave poor thing!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE sun shone almost brightly, and there was a hopeful twitter of birds in the air, as Tilly Westaway rounded a corner and came in sight of the little red-brick building which until this moment —at a quarter past ten on the morning after Boxing Day—had had no inner significance whatever in her thoughts.

Her eyes were heavy, and she moved with a mechanical step; but otherwise all seemed normal. Afterwards, Tilly wondered at her own apparently unnatural calm; till she came to remember that a merciful muffling haze had seemed to lie that day over London, blurring impressions, deadening sound, and rendering the scene partly unreal—like a drama unfolded upon a bioscopic sheet.

Yes, it blurred, even while it magnified, the impressions slowly filing past her. She could wonder at the spontaneity of a number of men—quite a dozen of them—who, advancing slowly in two's and three's from the opposite direction, all drew up outside the same building. There was a little coughing among them, and the furtive knocking of ash from pipes, and a pocketing of the pipes. They were dressed more or less subduedly, but obviously in their best; and, although they wore an outer air of unconcern, some uneasiness peered through it. As Tilly drew up close, they appeared to be talking of football and the weather with unusual reserve.

"Straight along the side-passage and up the stairs," said a policeman to whom she showed her piece of officially stamped paper. And Tilly, who from first to

last that morning seemed to forget her own power to speak, and her own place in the proceedings, passed along the passage.

Her heart beat a little more thickly as she arrived at the stair-top, but that was all. She saw a large, bare-looking room, with certain public notices on the walls —these being pinned over concert-programmes and the faded prize "animal" drawings of past infant scholars who might to-day marvel at their own imagination. On the left was a long wooden table flanked by a row of empty chairs, at the far end a more elaborate small one with leather covering, and on the right a bench running the whole length of the wall. Tilly went on and sat down at the extreme end of this bench. It was a shadowy corner—a sort of refuge from which one could see all without being noticed too distinctly. She prayed silently to herself for a moment—as if feeling that she was in church—and then looked about her.

There were other people in the room, and others just entering; but they made strangely little noise, and, like herself, seemed desirous of attracting as little notice as possible. During those first moments of waiting, Tilly's attention became riveted as in a fascination upon one central figure, who seemed throughout the presiding genius of the proceedings. Without this personality, Tilly came to think, nothing definite could have happened —all would have been confusion, without a beginning or an end.

This was a man; but a man who remained in Tilly's memory almost as a god. He was very, very tall, but supple and soldierly in his constable's uniform, and with an air of authority which somehow seemed to be the reverse of authority, and which made him almost lovable at sight. Tilly *did* love him, without knowing it; and watched his every movement, each droop of his uncovered dark head, each silent nod or gesture.

He was at work, straightening out the undoubted tangle, from first to last; he knew everything, and did everything—or showed just how it must be done. If he did not move on tiptoe, he seemed to. He was so cool and patient and unflustered, and quite unconscious of his splendid head, his enviable figure, his own womanly softness—almost amounting to a tender tacit sympathy with all who had to be there. No, Tilly never forgot this one man. He was called, she learned later, the coroner's officer.

Her glance had to veer. Quite a number of people seemed entering all at once. They were the men who had clustered outside—just a dozen of them. They edged in, some a trifle pale, some a trifle flushed, some fingering their mustaches uncertainly. Instantly the coroner's officer had taken charge of them—soothed away their awkwardness with little reassuring nods—and was softly shepherding them into the empty chairs beyond the long table. To each, in turn, as they sat down, he bent across and whispered some directions—for which they appeared to be very grateful indeed. He seemed to know of their reluctance, and to assure them that their worst part was really over, and that their turn to "serve" would not recur for a long time to come.

He spun quickly round again, his hand upon the shoulder of some one who had to speak with him officially. He nodded and closed his eyes to signify thorough understanding of the point, and was at work again, placing paper after paper carefully upon the small elaborate desk at the head of the room, and then turning again to see that everybody had a seat in the position required. He straightened up and stood at superb attention—to Tilly it looked like homage from an armored Sir Lancelot to a fussy pigmy—as presently the room door was swung in with quite a bang, and a shortish gentleman,

with a tall hat, long overcoat, and gold-topped umbrella strode in.

The gentleman responded with the briefest, curtest nod possible, and, there happening most fortunately to be nothing in his way, advanced with stiff precision, and without a glance to right or left, to the leather-covered table. Here he dropped his umbrella—which his officer sprang to pick up—flung down his gloves and newspaper, tossed his hat and coat to some one else, and fairly drove his body into the arm-chair placed for him. Once fairly seated—which took time—he snatched up paper after paper, scowled at it, bit his finger-nails as in some inward vexation, and, at last, looked over the top of his pince-nez and directed one sweeping, almost wolfish, glance around the room.

"Gone half-past ten!" he snapped out to no one in particular, and with an expression—an air of being utterly aloof from his surroundings—which deepened Tilly's dull awe.

The coroner's officer glanced at his own watch, and coughed gently. "You're right, sir—just within a minute of it, sir," he whispered.

"Gone half-past ten, I say!" repeated the other, with another irritable glance around. "I've come a long way, and have to get back."

He had a sharp, discontented voice, and was evidently not to be trifled with. He was most scrupulously dressed and groomed, the side-tufts of his whitening hair being brushed back and outward with such precision that they gave him facially the look of a hooded cockatoo. There were bilious specks in the rims of his eyes—perhaps due to a reactionary bile-system following upon Christmas. It transpired that, apart from the awkward day chosen, he had another grievance: he had been called in from another district to officiate, the local coroner proper being indisposed, and his deputy away on holiday. And

the indispensable "view" had taken him a mile out of his way.

"Chosen your foreman, gentleman? Do it as quickly as possible, please," whispered the coroner's officer, bending across the long table once more. "It should have been done before you 'viewed.'"

There were furtive nudgings and shaking of heads. Apparently no one had desired to be foreman; no one felt himself equal to the position.

"Quickly, please!" he begged, still most patient and courteous. And presently one man, much against his will, was singled out and edged along to the head of the table. He owed this honor, it appeared, to the fact that he had attended in a frock-coat, which marked him out as something above the ordinary on his own showing.

Just at this moment it was that Tilly, feeling a slight hand-pressure or fumbling upon her knee, became aware that beside her sat Bob Kingdom. A little gasp—more like a sigh of resignation than a sign of surprise—broke in Tilly's throat. Bob Kingdom!—yes, of course, he had received a paper like herself; and, of course, he was there. He said nothing; big and stolid he sat, his thick lips parted, his cap in his hand, just a mild interest in his slow blue eyes.

One last distraction in the formalities — one final fume from the coroner. Mrs. Westaway, after several threatened faints on the way, had arrived only a few minutes late. Dressed heavily in crape-bordered black, sobbing and whimpering, and supported by three of the picked faithful from Porter Street, she was led in, and accommodated with a seat near the door, for safety's sake.

"Yes, I know; but you must be quiet for a while," hushingly warned the coroner's officer. "For your own sake, you must, you know."

"Oh, let me die—let me die and be forgotten!" was

Mrs. Westaway's gasping reply, quite audible; and some mechanical response seemed to choke from Tilly's breast.

"Silence, there!" rasped the coroner, with the sweeping, stabbing glance over his pince-nez. "I'll have complete silence, officer, if—you—please!"

In complete silence he flicked over his documents, and at length, in a slightly modified, merely testy, tone of voice, appeared to be addressing himself to the jury, turning a ring upon his finger as he did so.

"Well, gentlemen, I don't know that the case before you presents any particular complications. It would appear to be one unfortunately—er—not very uncommon in the—er—sphere of life to which it pertains. The facts appear to be clear and simple enough in themselves. It is for you, of course, to say whether any doubtful elements are present; but personally—er—personally, I say, I see nothing whatever to cloud your judgment. You will see, when you have heard the evidence. We will have the evidence."

The coroner's officer, who had stood with head drooped respectfully, responded as by clockwork, and beckoned. The two constables who had been called to Porter Street on Christmas Eve, stepped forward from the doorway.

"One at a time, please—one at a time!" snapped the coroner, as, being duly sworn, they began to speak. "Bless me, I cannot listen to two people at once. You!"—he pointed at one. "The other, stand back. Right back! Now!"

The constable related in firm, intelligent terms what he had seen, what he had heard, what he had reported. From time to time the coroner put a hand to his ear, and made the witness hark back a sentence or so as on a point of principle. One or two of the jurymen penciled a dot or so on a slip of paper, and looked ashamed of being seen to do it. The coroner's officer stood like

a splendid leaning statue, but mentally alive to every movement in the room—his concrete deference toward the great little man at the table something truly wonderful to watch. To Tilly it seemed as if they were all enacting the scene on the other side of a transparent curtain. Even Bob Kingdom's big, heavily breathing figure, although so close to her, seemed to dart away into a background each time her mind wandered for an instant.

"Other officer corroborate?" demanded the coroner. And the other officer proceeded to corroborate. The coroner bit at his pen, glanced at the jury as if wondering why no one had the sense to ask a question, and asked it himself.

"But, come, come! Do we understand that neither of you actually cut down the body? Who did that? . . . Bless me, then, this is quite secondary evidence. We should have heard that witness first. And when you give evidence before me, don't consult your note-books so frequently—you should have your facts committed to heart. Both stand back!"

All eyes focused Bob Kingdom, as at length he grasped that he was being beckoned, and got slowly to his feet and stepped as slowly forward to be sworn, his jaws moving as though he were chewing a piece of straw.

"Name," prompted the coroner's officer, who held one hand just above a coiled bit of rope upon the table.

"Name? Ah, yes. Robert Kingdom."

"That all?"

"Eh?—oh, ay; Robert Henry Kingdom, I should say."

"Then, why *don't* you say so?" asked the coroner, burstingly. "Get on with it, do. What are you?"

"Me? Plumber."

"Say 'sir,'" whispered the coroner's officer, gently pressing the witness's arm.

"On the—er—evening of December 24th last, you went to No. 11 Porter Street. What did you find there?"

"Well—found him dead," replied Bob Kingdom, his glance rolling down sideways over the great man who sat as if repressing a keen desire to leap forward and worry something that could feel.

"Say 'sir,'" urged the coroner's officer, pressing his arm again most appealingly. And Bob Kingdom gazed round at him in turn, as if hardly following the point. It was a fact that he could not remember saying "Sir," to any one in his adult life, and yet no one had ever seemed to think it disrespectful—not in Bob Kingdom.

"Let him alone," blazed the coroner. "Can't you see? He doesn't know the meaning of the word—let him alone. Turn round, address yourself to the jury, witness; tell them in so many words, if you can, just what you found."

"Found him hanging behind the bedroom door," explained Bob Kingdom to the jury. "So did the only thing—cut him down."

"What with?" quickly asked the foreman, as if nudged by the others to justify his selection somehow.

Bob Kingdom rummaged in his waistcoat pockets and produced an ordinary clasp-knife. A little involuntary shiver went through the purely public section of the listeners, as he clicked it open, and showed a blade black from the paring of many apples and onions.

The coroner reached out and pounced upon the knife.

"That should have been in evidence—not in your pocket. We'll have it here, please, on the table. Dear me, get on!"

"Is this," asked his officer, lifting the coil almost reverently, "is this the rope you removed from the neck of the deceased?"

"Suppose so," muttered Bob Kingdom. "Yes, that's it. Didn't think to look at it much. Should say so."

The much-tried coroner smacked his open hand on the table—fortunately smothering a renewed wail from Mrs. Westaway, which her friends frantically suppressed.

"You 'suppose'; you 'fancy'!—I never came across such uncertain people! Come, come, you are simply asked to confirm statements you have already made to the police. Look at the jury—tell your story in so many plain words—I can't fritter my time away like this. Describe the position of the body. You entered this room, and you found. . . ."

Tilly tried to put her hands over her face, but they dropped back automatically again. She had to watch, and to listen, spite of herself. Her one conscious and successful effort throughout lay in endeavoring not to look toward her mother.

"Found him as I say," enlarged Bob Kingdom, incapable of being driven. "Door stuck a bit at first under the weight—had to push it, to get in. Found he'd stood on a box and hung himself to a nail just over the doorway inside, and kicked the box away."

"Is this point substantiated?" asked the coroner, still pen-nibbling as he turned over his papers. "Would a nail hold—would the space allow of it? I see the height of deceased is given here as five feet, seven inches. Has the door been measured?"

His officer, in low, soothing tones, explained that everything had been done to place the point beyond doubt.

"Oh, very well, very well! And"—to the witness—"What did you do next? You did something, of course—if we can only get at it."

"Laid him on the bed. Saw it was all over, and thought best to send for the police."

"Yes, yes! But let me tell you, you did wrong in

not sending for medical help then and there. It appears that quite a time elapsed—minutes, at any rate. However, we shall hear what the doctor has to say. There seems no reason to doubt, then, that—er—that—er—the act was self-committed, although not necessarily premeditated. No one else was on the lower part of the premises at the time; no one in this apparently crowded house seems to have heard the slightest sound—such as the kicking-over of this box——"

"Barring the boy! The boy might have heard somethink," came a shrill interruption from the other end of the room. It sounded involuntary, and yet designed. "I wouldn't say he didn't; oh, no! I don't like it all put on me."

The coroner's officer put up a silencing hand; but the coroner saw fit to ignore him and the rules of procedure.

"Eh? What's that? What boy? Stand up, there!"

The woman—first-floor tenant at No. 11—promptly stood up, with several decisive shakes of her head, and several determined tightenings of her shawl. Clearly she had meant to be heard at some point of the proceedings—the sooner, the better.

"I've had a paper, not to say several calls, and so I'm here," she said, bowing at him and then at the jury. "What I'd like to say, is, there's been too much talk for my liking. I've got four of my own—all mites, except one, if you don't believe me—and I couldn't be expected to hear anythink above their rumpus on bare boards. It's as much as I should do at times to know if a cannon went off. I own it was a bit quieter that evening you're speaking of, 'cause I'd packed two of 'em round to their Aunt Em'ly—and time she did give me a helping hand, too. But as for people to go saying—or looking, which is the same thing——"

"Stop her, stop her!" fumed the coroner. "What is

all this about? Confine yourself to the boy you mentioned. What boy?"

"Ah, what boy!" she trembled, evidently wound up for the occasion. "You don't need to ask what boy. He nearly throttled my lad on the stairs that same afternoon, besides several bites—and him so much smaller. He was there right enough." She swung her arm, and looked down at Mrs. Westaway, and then along at Tilly. "Don't tell me! I smelt somethink burning, and stepped to the landing, and he was just greasing along the passage—and that was full half-past seven, if it was anything at all. What happened after that, I don't pretend to say, not having eyes and ears in the back of my head, and being over the wash-tub as hard as I——"

"Sit down!" ordered the coroner. And she was plucked back into her seat with some difficulty. "What boy does she refer to? Is he in the evidence?—is he here?—is he anything or nothing?"

His officer explained that there was a boy named Gideon Westaway—movements uncertain on the night of the happening, and elusive and contradictory since that date. He had been told to attend the inquest with his parent, but was apparently beyond that parent's control. No importance whatever was attached by the police to his statements.

"He should be here," insisted the coroner. "If I thought it worth while, I should adjourn the inquest without hesitation. At this rate of progress, we shall never arrive at a verdict. Where's the man Kingdom? Come here, sir!—don't walk away until you have my permission. Are you any relative of deceased's family? How came you to be there on the evening in question? Who was there?"

Bob Kingdom looked at him very fixedly, and appeared to cogitate. Tilly, presently realizing, held her breath. She seemed to grasp that Bob Kingdom was

turning over in his slow mind a means of keeping her name in the background—screening her from an ordeal, in fact.

"No one was there," he told them, as if in wonder at the suggestion. "Happened to call, being a friend, and found the front door open. Walked in—and found him like that, as I said."

"Then—then what does the constable mean by saying that deceased's daughter, Matilda, was standing by the bed as he entered the room?"

"That's right. She came in afterwards," said Bob Kingdom quite simply. "Just home from her work at the minute. I fetched her into the room to show her what had happened—break it to her, like. Left her there, while I sent for the police."

The coroner—still as on a point of principle—seemed about to labor this thread of the evidence; but he happened to glance at his watch, and maybe the thought of his distant luncheon and leisure intervened.

"Any questions to ask this witness, gentlemen?" he demanded. "Perhaps you can do better than I."

"Er—er——" said the foreman, taken by surprise, "would you consider deceased a sober man?"

"Sober as could be," responded the witness, briefly but convincingly.

He was motioned back temporarily to his seat; and, half-unconsciously, Tilly felt for his big fingers, and gave them a convulsive pressure.

"Ann Westaway," was called.

Moaning and shrinking, Mrs. Westaway was led forward and held in position by two of her faithful friends. The coroner scented trouble, and frowned over his pince-nez at once.

"Come, you must compose yourself!" he rapped out. "You, like me, have a duty to perform. Let go of her! —she won't fall down. Now, then, attend to the officer;

take the oath properly, and answer the questions so that the jury can hear."

Mrs. Westaway answered the first one in a semi-shriek. At the second, she clasped her hands and seemed about to collapse. The coroner's officer, inured to such emotion, put out one arm in a steadying hold.

"Keep quite still," he advised in a whisper. "The coroner says—was deceased given to drink at all?"

"Oh!" sobbed Mrs. Westaway, as with an access of remorseful agony. "Oh! How can they ask it? Oh, when, as God hears me, he never touched——"

"Answer!" strained the coroner, with a reviving crash upon his table. "This inquiry is ordered by the Law, not for an exhibition of private feeling! A question has been raised. Yes or no—did the deceased drink to excess?"

"Never," moaned Mrs. Westaway, faintly. "Never!"

"Can you suggest any motive, then, for his act? I want to get to the root of the matter, if you'll only let me. Had you quarreled? Were your own habits temperate—or such as to embitter his life?"

"Shame!" came in shocked, audible murmurs from the little group of women wiping their eyes near the door. And the coroner bounced up as if shot.

"Eh, what was that? Turn those women out, whoever they are. Out, I say, all of them—I'll have respect, if nothing else!"

His officer glided across. There were remonstrances and soothing undertones; and finally two of the women impeached were persuaded past the door—with tacit permission to steal in again when they considered it safe. The coroner, his stringy neck resembling a turkey's, dropped back.

"Now!" he re-addressed the witness, acidly. "My duty is to ascertain the cause of this man's death, and whether he was of sound mind at the time; and ascer-

tain it I will. Take your hands away from your face; look at me, or else at the jury there. Is it the fact that, your husband being out of employment, you exasperated him by your drinking habits, and further——"

"Don't—don't answer him, mother!"

It burst vehemently from Tilly in her corner, with unexpected effect. The coroner took off his pince-nez and stared around in that direction as if too stupefied to swear to a voice, much less localize it. His feelings, indeed, seemed too intense to allow of adequate expression. He contented himself at length with an indifferent wave of his arm.

"Put the witness back. I won't inquire whether she is under the influence of drink at the present moment; put her back, and give her an opportunity to collect her faculties. The prevailing idea among these people, apparently, is that these proceedings are a farce. Call that person who interrupted just now!"

The first-floor tenant, nothing reluctant, advanced without any assistance. With many tugs at her shawl, and warning nods to the jury, she told who she was, and proceeded to add extraneous information.

"And *seeing* as it's nothing to do with me at all," she said with emphasis, "and me having *nothing* more to do with the family than with any one in the wide world, I fail to know why the sergeant here should pick on me. But you did! I ask to know why he should come round to my place three times, and make me pay fourpence to have my children minded——"

"'Sh!" said the coroner's officer. "You must not speak without being spoken to."

"Oh, mustn't I——" she began anew. But a courageous first-effort "Be quiet, ma'am!" from one of the jurymen checked her. For some reason or other, she was a little afraid of the jury, harmless as it looked in composition.

"Certainly, sir; I'll tell you all in a nutshell," she said impressively, answering the coroner. "All I dislike is for certain parties with long tongues to put it about that I must have heard something, or known something —oh, very good, sir, I'll keep to the point—I thought that was the point, excuse me! Well, then, the point is, that nobody could have heard anything of it, or stopped it in time—except it was Giddy, the boy. He'd been on my stairs monkeying about till I had to fairly throw him down—he not only kicks backwards, but bites—and I saw no more of him till, as I say, about half-past seven. He was just greasing out. I shut my door and went on washing—I had to, or else one of my children would have had nothing to wear next day. But as for hearing anything underneath — well, you might have knocked me down with a feather when I saw a crowd outside the house . . . Was he given to drink? Never!" she declared, in Mrs. Westaway's own word. "A quiet, steady stick of a man as ever breathed. I don't see what myst'ry there is about it, you gentlemen. The poor man had had no real work for months, and it took the heart out of him altogether, 'cause he wasn't a loafer. . . . His wife?" She glanced back at Mrs. Westaway, and a spark of pity seemed to rise above some smouldering grudge. "Well, no; if I'm supposed to be on my oath, it wouldn't do to go by hearsay. If she drank, it was out o' doors, where I couldn't be behind her; I never see any brought in to speak of. If you ask me, the poor man did it with a broken heart, and nothing more or less, and is well out of his misery."

A little to her own surprise, as she had come primed with a good deal more to say, she was motioned back.

The doctor, a fair gentleman who evidently shared the general awe of the coroner, took her place. In a low, rather flurried voice he pronounced that life had been extinct in the deceased for at least an hour—perhaps two

hours—upon his own arrival on the scene. He proceeded to describe in detail a subsequent examination he had been instructed to make of the body—so minute a description, indeed, that Tilly sat alternately burning and icy-cold, while her mother was assisted in a genuine faint to the head of the stair outside. When he sat down, the impression left upon the unofficial listeners was to the effect that there could be little or nothing left of James Westaway to bury.

And from that point, until she felt Bob Kingdom plucking at her arm, and stood up to realize that all was actually over, and the room nearly empty, Tilly abandoned herself to a lethargy—a sense of just sitting there while a great shutter slid between her past life and her life to come.

"What's the matter?—where's mother?" she gasped, clinging on to Bob until a swimming sensation passed. "What did they do—what did they say?"

"It's all right," he told her. "She's gone. Couldn't do her any good—not just now. Think they've taken her somewhere, to have something to take. Brought it in 'unsound mind at the time,'—that's all. All over now."

"Oh, Bob!" she said, realizing. "Oh, Bob, my poor father! And he was sitting there, in the kitchen, and I put my hand on his shoulder, only — only a few weeks——"

"Bear up," said Bob Kingdom. "Things will happen; did your best. Wouldn't give way—not here. Better if they'd had a real man for a coroner, no doubt. Better luck coming. This way!"

The jurymen, buttoning their coats and talking quite loudly and confidently in their relief, had just trooped out of the building. They felt chummy, and one or two were inclined to "make a day of it, and done with it," —especially as the frock-coated foreman pooh-poohed the idea of anybody but himself paying for a glass of

refreshment all round. It was a point of mutual congratulation that they had insisted upon receiving their fee apiece, in spite of the coroner's irritable comment upon the petty smallness of the amount, and the lack of "public spirit" that seemed to be abroad. Their verdict had been fixed and unanimous from the moment of entering the place, and they had delivered it promptly, and backed it up by handing over to the widow half their fees. And now they had one or two remarks of their own to ventilate.

"He's no man—or else I'm not one. Like to give him a piece of my mind on the pavement. Like to put him out of work on an empty belly for a few weeks. Sourest old packet I've ever come across. Oughtn't to be allowed. Good mind to write a letter myself to the papers. The woman ain't a convict, whatever she is. Why, any one 'ud think he reckoned himself the biggest bug on the Bench."

The policeman at the gate, flapping his arms as he took a step forward and a step back, laughed.

"P'raps he does," he said. "Good many of 'em do, don't they? But you people only grumble, and don't do anything—and there you are."

CHAPTER XIX

A RICH red fire burned in the old-fashioned "private," or three-ha'penny, bar; while, outside, the swoops and howls of the January wind at times certainly did, as Mr. Kingdom observed, resemble a "bloomin' Zoo in a fit," as to sound.

"I ain't putty; but it's double-pneumonia," he averred, "to go round any corner without two overcoats; and here, on'y yesterday, you could lose your boots in the slush and cut the hot fog with a knife. What you've got to go through in this country nowadays to get your few days o' sunshine in the summer—if you get 'em at all—well, it's like crackin' a nine-shelled nut to find a maggot wrapped round a bit o' dry husk inside. How the 'ell does a man know whether to leave off a shirt or put another on?—that's what I want to know. A Eskimo couldn't live here, I *do* know; a polar bear 'ud be knock-kneed in about ten days; a Siberian feller 'ud want to get back home. Here, when I was a lad, you had your real winter, and a gutful of it, with iron-black frost and snow up to your middle—and then a spell o' somethin' decently warm, to make up for it, with the wimmen walkin' about in muslin. Ever see a woman out and about in muslin nowadays? They'd be run in."

"They wouldn't wear it nowadays, in any case," lightly commented another man, who had dropped in for five minutes and forgotten to look at the clock. "At least, mine wouldn't. It wants too much 'getting up,' and it don't cost enough."

"Well, if you let 'em pick and choose, that's your look-out, ain't it?" remarked Mr. Kingdom. "If a man's got no backbone, his wife's the first one to find it out, ain't she?"

"That sounds all right in here," parried the other, smoking skeptically. "What you've got to remember is, that women change, just as you say about the climate. Women to-day ain't the same as women were at the time you're speaking of—fifty years back, we'll put it. Seem to have been stuffed lambs in those days, from what you hear and read; but nowadays you ain't a husband at all if you can't dress 'em so as to hide that you earn a pound a week less than the man next door."

"Quite so; law o' Nature, my dear fellow," airily explained some one else, himself unmarried. "Got a match, any one? Law o' Nature, I say. The world don't judge a man by his own clothes, but by his wife's. Time you knew that."

"Slightly contradicting yourself, ain't you?" asked the other, with the stiffness of either pity or envy. "If you know anything at all about the law o' Nature, you know that right throughout the animal world the cock-bird is the 'loudest' to look at. Now say I'm wrong!"

"So you are; because, by that very law o' Nature, there couldn't be any rule without an exception."

The other man stared, spat into the grate, and showed his contempt by silence.

Mr. Kingdom gave a "Phew!" of his breath, drew his stool a little farther back from the fire, and looked down unthinkingly at his own protruding frontal bulk.

"Going to knock off beer this year, and give it a chance, Mr. K.?" it occurred to some one to inquire. And Mr. Kingdom brought a glare to bear upon him.

"I might; and, again, I might not," he retorted, slowly. "Wouldn't do for us all to be alike even in that, would

it? People can see where I'm big, can't they?—but there's a bit o' guesswork about you, isn't there?—people 'ud have to say 'brain,' and risk it, wouldn't they? Dunno why you're turnin' like a pickled rainbow, my dear feller."

Happily, at this juncture the bar door swung in to admit another "nightly" with a blue nose and chattering teeth. Mr. Kingdom's concentration was diverted by an outer sound also admitted—that of a motor-car rushing along the main road close by, its hooter emitting a novel sound like that of a person being violently sick.

"Aha!" he recollected. "There's jest one or two things left for the workin' man to laugh at—a motor-car smashin' up with all in it, or one o' them dressed-up Alpine climbers missin' a thousand feet or so. If people scream for trouble, let 'em have it in lump, I say, and not in bits. I'd have all these motorists and Alpine lot tied together and slung down a precipice into bubblin', boilin', bloomin' pitch. People that take a pride in riskin' their lives ought to be encouraged. What say?"—to a man who had been discussing the evening paper with another, and nearly reached a wrangle.

"Oh, it's nothing much," replied the other. "Here, what do *you* think of a British officer that's allowed to leave the army and go abroad at a price and teach some foreign army all the tricks and moves he's learned in ours? What's your opinion? *I* says he's really a renegade; and so he is."

"A what?" queried Mr. Kingdom, who was not above learning a new word if it might come in handy.

"A renegade—a traitor—a skunk." He rapped the newspaper, clearly in earnest himself. "I say that a British officer who loans himself out to help drill a foreign mob, ought to be shot—just the same as a man who learned a firm's trade secrets here and then went off and sold them to a rival firm abroad. I know it's

allowed; but it can't be right, for all that. Why, there's another bit here about young British officers leaving their regiments and going off to offer themselves for the fighting in East Africa; and they're allowed to go. What's things coming to? Ain't there any discipline, let alone a sense of honor? If the officers can do it, you'll have all the privates hopping off and selling 'emselves to the highest bidder. That's what it looks like to me."

"Oh!" said Mr. Kingdom, who knew nothing about the particular circumstances indicated, but was not likely to admit it. "Oh! If you're an officer in the army, my dear feller, and you've got money and influence up your sleeve, you can do any mortal thing you like. You can be out shootin' big game on the Congo six months out o' the year, and be drawin' your full pay off the rate-payers all the while. But if you're a private, as you say, you've got to do what you're told; you're on'y a number—a ninepin. There's nothin' strange in that, is there? Confound it, miss, where's all that noise comin' from?"

"Noise?" echoed the barmaid deprecatingly. "The idea! Don't call that a noise, do you? That's a 'steak-and-onion' party upstairs—fifty of 'em; and they've just started the 'smoker.'"

"My word," ejaculated Mr. Kingdom, applying the red-silk handkerchief to his face and neck. "Jest started, eh? That's healthy. What'll they be like at closin' time. Here, give a thump on the ceilin', some one."

"Let 'em alone," she said, severely. "They're carmen—fourteen hours a day and a beanfeast in July if they're alive. I'd go up and lend 'em a hand myself, if I could."

The steak-and-onion party overhead burst out into a renewed roar—a rousing chorus sung with such gusto as to preclude any suspicion of irony.

" 'Waste not, want not'—this maxim I would teach;
Let your watchword be 'Dispatch,' and practice what you preach!
Never let your chances, like the sunbeams pass you by,
For you'll never miss the water till the well runs dry!"

"Well, there's a bit o' 'body' about 'em—which is more than any one can say for your beer to-night," admitted Mr. Kingdom, putting down his glass heavily. "Work that lot sixteen hours a day, and they'd have your roof off, I should say."

"Fancy that old song!—fancy the years and years since I last heard that!" one of the listeners had to remark. "Downright mysterious what should make one song all the 'go'—immortal, as you might say—when another just as good gets left and dies out almost at once."

"Not mysterious at all," Mr. Kingdom informed him promptly. "Dead, stark certainty, my dear feller. It ain't luck or merit that makes a song what you call immortal—it's the errand boys do that."

The next attempt overhead seemed a comparatively plaintive affair built around an injunction to "marry, but marry for love alone!" It brought Mr. Kingdom round on his stool with loud-breathed disgust.

"There they go! Thought they couldn't keep off that for long. Bust me, ain't they had enough of it? Carmen! Ain't they the fellers that get married at eighteen on a pound a week? 'Marry for love alone,' eh? Ought to be framed and hung up, that did."

"Finest institution in the world—marriage," observed the barmaid loftily, as she felt to see if her pyramidal coils of fair hair were still in position. "Makes two lonely people one, you know."

"Does it?" demanded Mr. Kingdom, who discouraged amateur attempts at humor or depth. "So I fancy I've heard. You go home and try it. You'll find it's a fight for life to settle which *is* that one. If I," said Mr.

Kingdom, laying one large hand flat on the other, and stirred to address his audience generally in measured, pulpit tones, "if I had my way, I'd do somethin'. I'd make Parlyment muzzle these bishops and others that keep eggin' young chaps and bits o' girls on to marry and have a crowd o' children, whether their pockets'll run to it or not. If I could write a book on that, and get it printed, I would to-morrow; and I give you my word it 'ud be worth readin'."

The company nodded, as with no doubt whatever upon that last point. The barmaid, called to the next compartment, strained her ears to listen.

"I'd tell 'em pretty plain," pursued Mr. Kingdom, stimulated by the lull in talk around, "that they're eggin' people on to social suicide. I would! While they're clackin' on about the 'happy home' notion, they're really killin' it; they've on'y got to look round and see that thousands o' couples who've took their advice and rushed into marryin' 'ud be on'y too glad to rush out again. Talk about taxin' bachelors—what! I'd give 'em a gold medal apiece for havin' the sense or the pluck to hold back a bit and do the ratepayers a good turn. Ain't a single feller that can keep hisself, less expensive to the State than a married couple with a lot o' kids that they find they can't keep alive? Look at your out-o'-works, your asylums, your jails—your bloomin' everythin' you can think of!"

Murmurs of approval—or of implied assent, at any rate. The repetition of that bit of sentiment overhead—"Marry, but marry for love alone!"—goaded Mr. Kingdom to empty his glass, order a re-fill, and take a yet deeper dive into his subject.

"And what knocks me more than all is, that half the very fellers that egg 'em on to it——"

"Oh, hark!" interrupted the barmaid, bringing her hands together. "Listen, do!"

Following a brief pause in the commotion above, the piano started afresh, gave a preparatory tum-tum-tum or so—and then came quite a novel sound in unison: a series of trills, just as though a caged bird had burst into rich song.

"There, now, Mr. K., don't you call that lovely? I must run up and have a peep at him—I really must!"

The private-bar company stood in a sort of spell, as if mentally following the flight of a lark gone beyond eyesight. The "bird" sank its outpour to a cheeping twitter, and then soared anew in a lifelike flood of limpid melody. Even Mr. Kingdom sat with the fresh glass suspended half-way to his mouth—till he grasped that it was only a man whistling to musical accompaniment.

"Never mind about that pack o' fools," he said. "What was I saying? Why, that what knocks me more than all, is, that half the very fellers that egg 'em on to it, ain't married at all, and ain't likely to be! Here's curates howlin' in the papers that they can't run to it on eighty or a hundred a year, and bishops with a thousand a year thinkin' that a missis 'ud take up too much room in a bit of a palace. But they reckon a feller with two rooms and a pound a week down some back street can do the thing on his head. Tell you what! They ought to be made to stand in the police-courts six hours a day, and jest hear what the magistrates have to say about these here rash and early marriages. They'd shout for help! What they're tryin' to do is, to keep drivin' a lot o' sheep into a market that's already crowded and choked; and they don't care how many get trampled to death in the squeeze, do they?"

"Well, I suppose it's the law o' Nature on the job besides," reflected the unmarried man, as Mr. Kingdom seemed about to pause. "You can't get away from that altogether. If a man sees a woman he fancies, you can't stop him very well to see how much he's got in his pock-

ets. And the woman isn't over-anxious for him to wait and think twice, as a rule."

"Ad—mitted," rejoined Mr. Kingdom, with unwonted depth and restraint. "Ad—mitted, my dear feller. You give a woman 'Look before you leap' to hang up in her bedroom, and she'll turn it round and scribble 'He who hesitates is lost' on the other side. You walk up the road out there, and lay your hand on any courtin' couple takin' up half the pavement—I don't care which couple it is—you'll find she's been bungin' into his ear that what'll keep one 'll keep two. Serve him right for believin' it; but the man that put that notion about in the first place ought to be cut up and spiked on a railin'. 'Keep two!' A woman that offered her old man half her breakfast egg 'ud soon get a lift under the ear, wouldn't she? And the baker ain't goin' to hand in a quartern loaf for the price of half a quartern because she says 'There's a couple of us now,'—is he? And a threepenny-ha'penny chop won't stand much carvin' up to look like a pair—will it? But they go on handin' down the tale. The rumbustical part of it all to me, is this: you can take any single feller you like, and you'll find he's on'y jest been able to keep hisself goin' on his money. But off he bounces, to eke it out on two—or three, you might just as well say; for if she on'y wants a new hat, it costs double what his does. Idiotic, ain't it?"

"Doubling the sorrows and halving the joys, isn't it?" suggested the barmaid, returning in time to catch the last few words. Mr. Kingdom dismissed her with a snort into his red handkerchief.

"That's my advice to any feller without a reserve-fund behind him—his marriage-knot'll turn out a bloomin' noose. As for the wimmen"—with a jerk of his head toward the bar—"well, I wouldn't waste my

breath. Let 'em marry and put up with it. They deserve all they get in this world, and p'raps more."

"There you are; I'm sure he's been crossed in love," said the barmaid with conviction, as she polished her glasses. "I've noticed it for a long time. Has it taken you off your food at all, Mr. K.?"

"Wimmen," strained Mr. Kingdom, his eyes protruded more and more as he glared at the hot fire, "used to know they were on'y hens; but now they want to be hens and do all the crowin' as well. Wimmen used to be kept in their place; but nowadays you don't know whether you're addressin' a man or a woman except for the clothes—and *that* won't be anythin' to go by much longer, by the look of it. In fact, a woman's more of a man now than he is hisself—if you can make anythin' o' that."

"There's more women than there are men, you mean to say," supplied somebody, to make the point clear. "Every one knows that."

"Keep quiet," said Mr. Kingdom. "You're an unfortunate fool, p'raps, but you needn't keep showin' it. When I say a thing, I can prove it, or I don't say it at all. I s'pose you're a bit of a parrot into the bargain: you'd argue it out that a woman is the 'weak' sex—the 'gentle' sex—and all the rest of it. Eh?"

"No, I call 'em rotters myself," he said boldly, catching a wink from the barmaid. "There's no argument about it—not in that way. But you're the only man I know of that can see through wimmen properly."

"Aha, p'raps I can," said Mr. Kingdom, taking a drink. "A woman, my dear feller, mayn't be able to stand up to a man with the gloves on; but she's got somethin' else—somethin' to make up for what they like to call her weakness. Gimme any average woman, dark or fair, and I'll back her against any average man when there's anythin' nasty or cold-blooded on the board."

"As how?" inquired the other, prompted afresh from the bar-counter.

"As how? Well, I did give you credit for havin' eyes and ears, if nothin' much else. Ain't the birds o' the earth bein' wiped out wholesale for your gentle, lovin' woman? Ain't she wearin' 'em by the million stuffed in her hat? D'you reckon she'll stop it while there's a bird left, so long as the other woman wears one? D'you think, jest because she's told it's pulled out o' the bird alive, she'll give up sportin' a—what d'you call it?—aigrette in her bloomin' hair? Ain't she had it dinned into her ears for years what slaughterin' and carvin' up her 'fashions' mean? And don't she laugh up her sleeve while she sheds a tear—and go out and buy more stuffed nightingales? And that's on'y one little thing. If wimmen are 'soft,' my dear feller, it ain't in their feelin's. Oh, no!"

"Go on," said another man, interested—and perhaps intending to impress his own wife later. "What else?"

"Thousands o' things," said Mr. Kingdom, sweepingly. "You reckon yourself artful, don't you? Well, then, wimmen are a sight artfuller, and always were. They've been playin' a deep game all along. If you put a couple o' female armies up against one another, they wouldn't give no 'quarter' or see any white flag; they'd chop and stab as long as there was anythin' left to polish off. That's your wimmen!"

"Well, that's all assertions," objected his previous opponent. "I'm waiting for you to do what you said—*prove* it."

"Ain't I provin' it?" boomed Mr. Kingdom. "Ain't I showin' that wimmen haven't got any sportin' instincts in any way whatever? Ever hear of a female havin' any pity for a fallen enemy, as the sayin' is? You let two wimmen have a quarrel over anythin'—I don't care whether it's a man or a monkey—the one that gets done

down has got to feel it, and keep on feelin' it. The other'll walk past her with a blood-boilin' smile, and her head in the air every time, and rub the salt in as hard as she can—do everythin' she can think of to keep the other female down in the dust. *That's* what I mean! Whatever a man is, he wouldn't do that—he couldn't, by nature. Once he'd bowled the other feller over, as likely as not he'd shove out his fin for a shake; he'd let him down lightly, anyway, and say no more about it. But wimmen!—what! There's no 'forgive and forget,' about that lot. Once they've torn each other's hair out, they're ready for another 'go' at any time. *They* don't trust one another; they ain't so 'soft' as all that. And the more they smile and admire each other's finery, the more you know they're lookin' for a soft place to stab at. They're all the same—I don't care whether it's a duchess in her bath o' warm whisky or a fish-fag hawkin' trotters down your alley. All the same underneath, and always will be!"

The barmaid, with a cryptic smile, and an air of satisfied interest, glided out of hearing to the measure of a waltz-refrain from overhead. One of the company borrowed a pipeful of tobacco from another man, and thought of something apropos as he applied the match.

"Well—puff—it is a rummy thing—puff—when you come to think of it," he contributed. "I was only saying the other evening—Tuesday, wasn't it? No, Monday; 'cause I'd had a little shine-up with the wife, and took her to see 'A Woman's Wild Oats'—I was only saying, they don't half 'go for' the petticoats in these plays and novels nowadays, as a matter o' course."

"Don't half *what?*" demanded Mr. Kingdom, disliking interruptions, however relevant.

"Why, in novels and plays, and all that sort o' thing," he explained, with vague insistence. "See what I mean? As often as not they let the 'villain' o' the piece relent and show there's a decent streak in him after all; but

the adventuress woman—no, absolutely never! She's always an out-and-out wrong 'un right to the finish, you'll notice. Just struck me about that, as you were harping on it."

"Oh, did it?" muttered Mr. Kingdom, grudgingly. "Well, I never read books—packs o' lies—when I can see all I want about the real thing in my paper; and I never go to any theaters; no man 'ud get me to wait an hour on the pavement to see 'A Woman's Wild Oats'—I can see 'em outside,—haystacks of 'em. But, excuse me, that's nothin' to do with what I was sayin'—that your female can give points and a licking to any man when there's any flayin' and skinnin' alive to be done. Why, on'y give her half a chance, and she'll march up to Court as cool as a cowcumber to snatch 'breach' damages from a man who's been buyin' her presents and takin' her out for a treat every other night. She'll stand up there as bold as brass, with jest a few crocodile tears to order, and hear all the feller's love-letters read out and shoved in the newspapers; *she* don't mind havin' all her own feelin's pulled out and laid on the Court table and carved up by the opposin' counsel. I say a man couldn't do it! If he's jilted and chucked, as he often is, after all his out-o'-pocket expenses, he don't make any fuss, although he's got the same feelin's. And, mind you, it's generally a parcel o' spite and revenge on her part. By goin' up to Court like that, she jest simply proves she didn't really care a rap for the feller at all. If she did, she wouldn't want to bring him on his knees before everybody and squeeze money out of him; she couldn't, by mere ha'penny logic! Ah, I like to hear 'em rave on about 'wounded womanhood' and so forth, I do. I'd give 'em a farthin' damages, and brand 'em on both cheeks, so's every other feller should know 'em at sight. That's me!"

"And yet," hazarded some one, with spirit, "if you'd

happened to be a woman, Mr. K., and you'd been jibbed by a feller, I reckon you'd have a cut at his pocket—and as low down it as ever you could get."

Mr. Kingdom rose, and buttoned his overcoat.

"Course I should," he said. "That's my point. That only shows what wimmen *are*. I'll say g'night!"

CHAPTER XX

"PANGFIELD, HERTFORDSHIRE,
"February 6th.

"DEAR ALICE,—

DID the snowdrops bloom? That's one little thing I've never forgotten, and feel as if I must ask that first of all. I see myself now, putting the little bulbs into my poor brown eggs.

"Dear Alice, I think I have been ill, because everything seems such a long way back. That is why I have never written to any one till now. Not *really* ill, with the doctor in; but somehow all so quiet in my head, and then a little buzzing noise, and then all quiet again, just as if all the people had stopped talking and walking of a sudden. I keep trying to think how I got home that day, after I left mother at the cemetery, but the first thing I seemed to know was that it was next morning, and I was cleaning master's brown boots instead of his black ones. Perhaps that did it, he being so particular about his boots; although he never says anything to me, but always to the mistress, which makes her so cross.

"Well, dear, I went on with my work all right for a day or two, as I thought, and tried my best to feel I'd begun all over again; but it always seemed as if the mistress was creeping down the stairs to look in at me, and if I only stopped working for a minute, and forgot where I was, there was she, just behind me. I said out loud once, 'Oh, please, ma'am, don't do it!'—I don't know whatever made me. I must tell you, dear, that

when mistress found out how father died—as I had to let her know after the inquest paper came—I think she meant to tell me I had better go. I could tell by her look, and words that were dropped. I didn't mind; I wouldn't have troubled any one; I should just have taken my box and wandered off somewhere — I don't know where. I couldn't come to you and upset you, because you have your own trouble that no one knows of. But I should never again wonder at any poor thing coming down as low as a woman can, for want of some one to turn to when her mind seems lost. It taught me that lesson—not to judge anybody ever again, even in my thoughts.

"But one day the mistress came down and said she was going to the country for a few days, and I was to go with her. She felt she could do with a little change before spring-cleaning, she said; and I quite thought she meant it—at least, I didn't feel able to think about it at all. We took the train somewhere the day after that, and before I knew it I found we were at a terribly lonely little place, with hardly a soul to be seen, and no shops, and only one fly at the station to take us on another three miles by the road. It really seemed as if we were coming nearer and nearer to the edge of the world, as they say.

"Well, we got in the end to a little cottage, and here we are, and here we've been for just on a month. I felt too low and queer to say anything, but I was so surprised to find another maid already there — a big country girl, Martha by name, who talks all the time about young chaps, although I've seen hardly any here myself, and can't make out where she does, as it's all fields and lanes. It seems the cottage belongs to the minister here, and mistress knows him, and took it off him for a month, he having a big vicarage as well. And now, according to Martha, she did it on my account, and

not on her own at all. I mustn't say anything, and mustn't appear to know, Martha says; but mistress thought I was looking far from well; wasn't it kind of her?—not to say why she did it, I mean? I feel I can't quite make her out, even yet. She's not at all what you might call like a mother to me, in her talk and ways, but she seems to be all that in her thoughts. And yet she's one, Alice, that if she sends you out with a shilling for a yard of something at eleven-three-farthings, the first thing she thinks of is the farthing change. Made me feel so miserable at first, if I happened to have it inside my glove, and wasn't quick enough. Fancy *you* asking any one for a farthing so sharp, even if you were starving at the time! I oughtn't to say so, I know, but I don't think I quite like the people who are just before they are generous, as the mistress often tells me we should be. I'd rather have the people who don't stop to think which is which.

"I hope you can read this writing, Alice, dear. I haven't taken up my pen for a long time, and this one is Martha's—all rusty. I've got two more to write—must do it; but I meant you should have a long, long letter at last, when I could bring myself to sit down and think about it all. I came away without my text-book, and my 'Do noble deeds, not dream them all day long'; and perhaps that accounts for me feeling more like a dead lump than a girl earning her living, and only her 'character' to call her own. I'm afraid I'm not like you, Alice, and never could be. It's just like a bit of good elastic and a bit of inferior. When *you're* stretched out sudden as far as you can go by some trouble, you go back again to your right size at once; but as for me, I seem to keep just what they've pulled me out to.

"Never mind, dear; if I've been ill, I know I'm better now, and feel ever so much kinder to everybody. I've said 'good-bye' to father in my heart; and I wouldn't—

couldn't—do that a month back; I wanted to go after him. And I've told myself I shall find him in the next life, and do a little more for him than I thought to do while I had him here. And I'm writing to mother. And bit by bit it's all coming back to me that I've got to bear things without standing up and asking the why and the wherefore.

"Alice, dear, this is a terrible place, that I shan't be sorry to see the back of—not really. If this is the country, no one can wonder that London's so crowded. You seem cut right off from the real world. I've got a little room at the top, with a ceiling made so as it slants right down to the bed; I don't mind that, except that I've forgot it and bumped myself nearly silly once or twice in the night; but all I can see from the window here—or any of the windows—is miles and miles of shivery bare fields that make you feel sometimes you must get up and run all the way back to London, and the dear old streets, and the lights. One year there must be as much as a lifetime here. I don't know how they *do* live here at all. There's a nice smell in the air, but when you've said that you've said everything. Mistress says we are only twenty-four miles out from London, but you can hardly believe it's not the South Pole that they talk so much about.

"There are a good many other houses, but they all seem tucked away around corners or behind trees, and no one ever seems to come out of them. They don't walk about like we do in London; if the chimneys didn't smoke a little, you wouldn't dream anybody was alive. The post-office is a little chandler's shop a mile down the road, and the man keeps you waiting for a stamp ever so long while he serves bits of bacon and candles. And you can't buy anything much, even if you have the money, unless you can trapse five miles through mud to the nearest town. Oh, I'm so thankful I wasn't born here; I should have moped; that's one thing to feel grateful for.

"Did I tell you there are no pavements and no lights after dark? I wouldn't dare venture out a yard after dark, as there are no policemen, and anything might happen, and nothing more ever heard of it. I trod on a great toad in the garden the other night, and nearly screamed, and felt so sick. After all I've heard about the country, I can hardly believe it. Why, London will seem like a fairyland after being lost on a bog. Mistress sent me up the road the other way for a walk last week, but I was soon back. It got narrower and narrower, and thick with awful mud, and graveyard-looking woods on both sides. They needn't have put up 'private' at the paths; I should never want to go any farther than the gates. And everything is so deathly quiet that you can seem to hear water dripping off the trees a mile away. I keep longing to catch sight of the railway station again. Dear old London! Now I can understand what the countryman in the play felt when he saw the 'Lights o' London,' and got nearer and nearer. Oh, Alice, I wouldn't put a dog down here to live, much less a human being.

"Mistress says the people are a poor, downhearted lot, and that everything is more backward than it was twenty years ago. The men only get about twelve or fifteen shillings a week to keep a family on, and that not always, as the farming doesn't pay for itself, and the farmers let their fields stand empty year after year. Some of the women, with babies in arms, pick up stones out of the fields all day for four shillings a week. It does seem hard. But if they had more money, I don't see there is anything to buy or to enjoy. If the cart comes from the town, you have to pay very dear for the things. Whatever would they think if they saw all the piles of things on the stalls in our streets—and all so cheap! There are no vegetables or fruit, or anything of that to be got here; and very often no milk. Last week we had condensed. We are very close to the

farm, and cows seem standing about everywhere, but they send it all to London. Unless you were here, Alice, you wouldn't believe it. I sometimes find myself saying, whatever would mother do here? I should give her one day, and then I expect she'd start back for Stepney on foot, perish or no perish.

"Well, Alice dear, here I am talking all about myself, and never a word about you. Perhaps it's because I *think* so much about you both that I seem to know just what you are doing, and just how you both look in your dear little nest of a home. Doesn't it seem wonderful to think that your husband will soon be going out to business and coming home again at night like every other man? I know how thankful you are, and how you sing to yourself at your work. I meant to ask you once again not to slave too hard at the dressmaking, but I don't like to, because I know, if I had any one to look after myself, I should work my fingers to the bone for him, and feel happier than any queen in a palace with no husband. And that reminds me, dear.

"Master sent on the little note that you wrote to me at Highbury. Did I tell you? We left him behind there, although I can't imagine him shifting for himself, as he was never one to touch a saucepan, or even look at one. He never looked at me, come to that, if he could help it, and always got out of the way if he saw me coming up the stairs with the pail or brooms. Well, dear, in the note you said something about Mr. Bob Kingdom, and that you and your husband would be so pleased for us both to call in for an hour together some evening.

"Well, dear, I know you said it for the best, and you really hoped it; but I must have given you to understand all wrong somehow. There's nothing of that, Alice—not what you're thinking. He's great big Bob to everybody, but he walks about in the world, as you might say, all to himself, and always will do. It wouldn't do for him to

think that sometimes I dream of him, but I do—I can't help it; and I always see him moving along by himself, quite contented as he is. He's worth a whole bundle of fops rolled into one, but how are you going to make him know it? That seems the way of the world, dear—that when you see a man you can admire and look up to, you wake up and find he mustn't be touched.

"And now, dear, if mistress hadn't gone to the town for the day with the minister in his trap, I couldn't have written all this. And now I shall be counting the hours before I feel your arms all round me again. I'm longing, and yet in a way I'm dreading. You know, dear!—I told you of a certain party who once got me to care for him and want to look after him, and then turned round and showed me what he was. I won't say too much. He wanted me without the trouble of marrying me; and his last words to me were: 'Sooner or later.' I don't know where he is, or what he does for a living now; but somehow I always have the feeling that he's not far off. And he whistled round the house, and kept me in a constant tremble—perhaps in the hope that the mistress might turn me off as no good. It's so silly of me, Alice, dear, isn't it, but that whistling haunts me. Never mind; I hope I know that if a man wants a woman in that way, his love is not love at all, but something very different. So if I'm never to find any one who wants me for life—well, I mustn't think about it at all, must I? But I do wish I hadn't got a heart to feel so—just as if I *must* have some one to work for and look after.

"There, dear, eight pages, and just on dinner-time. I'll fasten this up at once, in case Martha wants to see what it's all about, as she shows me the notes she writes to the young chaps about here. You would not think them nice notes, as she makes a joke of everything, and *that* makes the answers she gets worse than they need be.

Ah, well! Perhaps she had no kind Alice to help her see things different. With a big, big hug, dear,

Your affectionate TILLY."

"PANGFIELD, HERTFORDSHIRE,
"February 6th.

"DEAR MR. KINGDOM,—I might seem to be taking a great liberty in writing to you without being asked, but I don't mean it for that. It's only because I feel that I have let all this time go by and never even thanked you or your dear old mother for all you did for me. Don't think for a moment that I forget, or ever shall do so. But somehow I'm only just beginning to know that it all really happened, and that I dragged you into our trouble when it was nothing to do with you at all. Please, dear Mr. Kingdom, let your mother know that I can't tell her what I think. If ever she is in any trouble of her own, let her think first of me.

"I must tell you this is a little country place, where we've been for a month, as mistress fancied a change, and money being no object, etc. It is dreadfully lonely, and I think you would miss your apples and onions down here very much. I have been just once to the town near by, and even there it was not much better. Mistress wanted an Ostend rabbit, but there wasn't such a thing in the place. They wanted four-pence for a small cauliflower, such as is three-ha'pence at home, although I thought they grew them in the country places. And oh, how you would laugh at the fish. It is like gold, what there is of it—a scrap here and there, just as if it was in a museum. One big fish shop had just two haddocks—eightpence each, and very dry-looking. In our High Street they would be dear at twopence, and a three-ha'penny mackerel was fivepence, and none too fresh—no red eyes, etc. I really enjoyed looking at the prices. When I thought of the stacks of haddocks in our shops—

lovely little yellow things a penny each or seven for sixpence—well, I can't seem to get over it. A shilling here must be worth at least five shillings in London. However is it?

"I've thought a good deal about poor Jimmy since you so kindly went there with me; but I suppose it is no use cheating myself into any hopes. It seems to me that this is a place where all of them might be put and live quite comfortably, because there is no one about to notice what they do, or how they dress, or what sort of faces they make at each other. There are miles of fields and woods here that are only kept to look at; but how I miss the noise of the buses and the trams. What would they think of a penny tram-ride for three miles here? We had to pay three shillings in a musty fly to get here from the station, and the horse seemed on its last legs, poor thing. Never mind, I shall soon feel the dear old pavement under my feet again, and feel I'm alive. The first day out I get, I shall go to see Jimmy first thing of all. If I make a regular thing of it, I shan't be tempted to think that he's all right, and doesn't mind being there now he's got used to it, and so on and so forth. I won't say more about it now, but I've got a little idea in my head, and I'm going to keep to it—to make just one bright spot for him that will seem like what they call a little Ohio in the desert.

"Well, now, dear Mr. Kingdom, I won't trouble you with all I think about it. I feel that you'd rather me thank you this way than face to face as it were, if at all. As for your mother, being the kind old soul she is, she'll understand without any telling. With my love to her now and always,

"Your little friend, TILLY WESTAWAY."

February 6th.

"DEAR MOTHER,—At last! But not because I haven't

thought about you; oh no! You know different, if you've felt like sitting down and thinking it all over—as I hope you have by now.

"I haven't put any place on the top of this letter, because you wouldn't know where it is, and you wouldn't feel like hearing much about it—that I do know. Enough that I shall be back at Highbury very shortly, and very thankful too. This place may be all very well to grow vegetables, but not people. Still, don't think I mean to be ungrateful, as it was done for the best.

"And now, dear mother, I want to have a little talk to you, as the only one left you have to turn to. I won't say that what has happened is all for the best, because we know it isn't, and that we'd rather have poor father with us till we had to part because our time had come. At first, mother, I thought my heart would break; but I want to be a good girl if I can, and so help you to be a good mother; that's the only way we can bear our trouble. Dear mother, you know what I mean. Don't give way! Oh, don't! I'm afraid it's too much to ask you to give it up altogether, as you've got the taste for it, but just stand still now and then when you get to the front door, and look back at the kitchen where father used to sit—in your mind, I mean; and think to yourself that it may all come out in Giddy again, unless you stay in to look after him. The Day *will* come, mother; and you'll be asked what you did to help make a man of him, instead of running wild and picking up scraps in the Row with no soles to his boots. Oh, mother, I don't want to be cruel to you, because I know what you've suffered lately; but don't think that the drink is sent just to drown trouble. How can it, if it makes you want more, till you forget that a man won't come home to his home if his wife prefers the (you know) to his company? I want to help you, as I say; but if you can't drop it now, I'm afraid I shall have to think that you don't care even for your children.

It seems so strange, mother, that if I had a boy of my own like Giddy, and only a penny in my pocket, I could no more spend it in beer than in poison. For his sake, do take yourself in hand, and think just now and then. Life's so short, mother—it will all soon be over. I didn't know myself till lately, how long we can make it seem, by trying to do our best for everything and everybody.

"I heard you and Giddy had gone into one room. I was sorry, though, to hear you couldn't tear yourself away from Porter Street. I can't think I'm never to walk along into the old kitchen any more—I mustn't think about it at all, or I should break down. But whatever you do, or if the worst comes to the worst in any way, don't part with father's old chair. Don't do that, mother, or I shall never be able to forgive you. While we've got that, I shall feel we've got *him*.

"Am inclosing two-and-nine—all I've got. I'll write to Giddy as soon as I get back, and tell you when I am coming over—at least, no, I won't. Perhaps I shall take you by surprise, and I'm going to hope for the best when that happens. It's just getting dusk, and at dusk I always can seem to hear the church organ and those two hymns—'Now the day is over' and 'Sweet Saviour bless us ere we go.' Can't say any more, mother; feel choky and cut up. Good-bye!

"Your loving TILLY.

"P.S.—Don't forget that 'good-bye' is short for 'God be with you,' and that He *is* with you if you want Him."

CHAPTER XXI

HULLO—hullo—hullo, here!"

Mr. Kingdom, senior, advancing casually to his shop doorway at six o'clock on the evening of February 12th, was surprised into a little series of throat-rumbles, appearing to denote that he might withdraw a few of the most trenchant remarks he had made about the weather lately.

In that last half-hour London's depressing, day-by-day pall of dim haze had quite vanished—just as though a giant had puffed his breath steadily across the land; and even Stepney High Streeet looked a little better for the change. The sky was sharply, coldly clear, and to the westward, actually, suggestions of a lilac sunset lay melting against a lemon-hued background. Something keen in the air, too, set the nostrils sniffing curiously. It was something awakening out of the rural earth, and carried here by the breeze—something almost forgotten above ground. It revived, however deceptively, thoughts of green paint, trellis-work, spring-cleaning, shooting bulbs, and—most blessed memory of all—the smell of the dust after April rain.

"Bit o' sense about that," Mr. Kingdom allowed himself to comment. "Hullo, Happy! Quarter-day—and your rent—comin' round a bit sudden, eh?"

He had taken the provision-dealer next door unawares—in a rather mournful attitude, with shoulders stooped, hands clasped together as if for warmth, and watering eyes that for a moment were blank of expression. Being

"freehold" himself, he felt just a little inclined for once to relax his hostility.

"Me? Oh, it's nothing of that—I wasn't thinking of anything at all," said the provision-man hastily, coming to with a jerk. "No, I was just marveling at them motor-bus chaps over there. Got just three minutes' rest between the journeys, and wolfing down great chunks and hot tea as if they could digest it."

"Not half," said Mr. Kingdom, almost heartily. "And enjoyin' it a sight more than if they'd got two hours and a cook-shop table. Hot fish and 'taters next journey for supper, and show their way-bill and change their coppers into the bargain—all in three minutes. Live against time, them fellows, and no mistake. It 'ud kill you in a month, no doubt, if that's what you mean."

"Very likely," said the other, glancing at his cut rashers as if he wished he hadn't cut them. "'Tisn't always the likely ones that are carried off, though; I *was* thinking about that, as it happens. Wife's father found cold and dead in bed this morning, we hear; and it ain't a month since her mother went off in a fit, and my own brother died abroad. That's luck, if you like!"

"I should say so. You stand a good chance o' bein' wiped right out, your little lot, then?" commented Mr. Kingdom with full-bodied interest. "What the meanin' of it? Run in the fam'ly, does it? What's he want to go and die abroad for?"

"Because he happened to be there at the time, I suppose. Broke a blood-vessel somewhere, as far as we've heard."

"Oh, well, there you are, then—doin' somethin' silly, no doubt." Mr. Kingdom, who had a little uneasiness occasionally as to his own internals, passed a hand testingly over his chest. "Well, it won't be anythin' o' that with me," he conjectured; "'cause I don't do enough stoopin' or strainin' about. For the matter o' that, I

can't; I give up lacin' my own boots long ago; it was either that or burst. No; mine 'll be a closin' up all round inside, by the feel of it. I send the scale down with a bang at eighteen stun' as it is; so there must be some flesh knockin' about inside me *somewhere,* as well as outside. What d'you say?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," mused the other, eying him reflectively. "I shouldn't altogether fancy being like it myself. It's having nothing to do, I suppose —that and other little things. I've often wondered how you get in and out of bed as you do. I know what I should do, if I thought it was getting serious—put myself straight in the hands of a good doctor, and make it worth his while to do something."

"Not me," said Mr. Kingdom, with the nearest thing to a shudder. "I'd sooner shut my eyes and let some one have a runnin' kick at me and get over it quick. Not me! I've never found any doctor yet that knew as much about me as I did myself. I went and paid my seven-and-six to one big bug, and all he did was to knock me down to a pint a day; any fool could do that. I'd sooner go to a 'tanner' dispensary feller; for another 'tanner' they'll tell you you can drink as much as you like, providin' you don't overstep the mark. There ain't two doctors that think alike; what with one and another, you'd soon be past wantin' med'cine. What do *you* go, if it ain't a rude question?" He looked the provision-man up and down with some reluctant envy. "Four stun in your shirt, at a pinch?"

"I couldn't say," was the distant answer. "I've got no particular reason to feel anxious—I have to dodge about for my living; and it's a moral certainty I shall never drink, for I can't keep it down. Still, there's such a thing as a little exercise, isn't there? Or, seeing you don't have to count your money, why don't you go in for a Turkish bath once a week?"

Mr. Kingdom stared glassily. As a matter of fact, the far-fetched idea had already occurred to him at intervals, but distastefully.

"It's enough trouble dressin' and undressin' myself once a day as it is," he muttered. "All very well for people like you, that don't split your undershirt gettin' it on about twice a week. What d'you know about Turkish baths?—what good d'you reckon they are?"

The provision-man, drawing his knife along a piece of bacon, shrugged with justifiable indifference.

"Don't take my opinion on anything, Mr. K.," he observed. "You don't suppose I've got time for anything of that fantastical sort, do you? If I wash half-way down one week, and half-way up the next, that has to be good enough for me. I've *read* that the idea is, to open the pores of the skin—how or why, I couldn't say. You go in a sort of oven, and they shut the door on you. If you were a bit of dough, you'd 'rise'; as you ain't, you shrivel. That's the idea, I believe."

"Oh, is it?" said Mr. Kingdom, shaking himself. "Well, I'll keep as I am. If my pores don't like to open o' themselves, let 'em keep shut."

He withdrew. Very shortly afterwards—possibly pricked by that suggestion of exercise—he emerged again in his hat and overcoat.

A walk of ten minutes down the road, however, with the breeze against him, and that load of flesh to carry, proved quite enough. Full an hour earlier than usual, he swayed round a corner, and puffingly entered his favorite bar.

It was brilliantly lit and comfortably warm, but deserted. With a sigh Mr. Kingdom sank down on to his corner stool, called for refreshment, sucked at his pipe, and waited. The probability was, that he would not have to wait long. Meanwile he ruminated heavily upon the thought of hazarding a Turkish bath without a word to

anybody. The "shutting the oven door" was a possibility that he did not relish; it had a crematory sound.

He gave quite a start as presently the bar door swung, and some one looked in as if to sniff the atmosphere. Apparently the inspection satisfied; the gentleman entered, followed by another. One was young and dark—the other middle-aged and florid; as far as Mr. Kingdom was concerned, both were strangers—outsiders—intruders, in short. The one thing that attracted Mr. Kingdom was the fact that, although the younger man was willing and anxious to pay for the drinks, the middle-aged one pushed the money back, and insisted on paying himself.

"Well, you are an obstinate cuss in everything," said the young and dark one, with half a smile at Mr. Kingdom. "You want money, and yet you throw it away. Ah, by the bye, what about that stuff of yours? What have you settled to do about it?"

"Let it go by auction. I'm not going to trouble another jot. Let it all go together in the heap for what it'll fetch."

"Well, you're mad," was the other's further audible estimate. "You're an idiot," he added, with conviction. "You must be. I'd shoot myself, sooner than let 'em collar all that valuable stuff for an old song."

"Perhaps I shall shoot myself," was the moody rejoinder. "I'm going to clear the whole place out. I want the money on the spot; I'm not going running about Clerkenwell or Hatton Garden offering bargains on my knees. I let the next-door man have all those thick brass stair-rods for three half-crowns down. 'Go on,' I says; 'clear 'em out quick.' And he did. Twenty pounds the old man gave for that lot, not so many years ago; I've got the receipt somewhere."

"Maniac," the other breathed, with a scowl. "Why didn't you offer 'em to me?"

"Because I wanted to see the money," was the brief but luminous response.

They chatted on, now subduedly, now heatedly, with now and then a sign of an explosion. Catching a good many words here and there, Mr. Kingdom became interested enough to put a hand behind his ear and listen quite openly. Pretty soon he sat as without breathing.

"Look here, listen to me!" said the younger man, holding back the other as he made to depart. "Will you listen to me? Will you hand the stuff over to me, and simply give me a ten-per-cent commission on what I get? I'll find fifty customers inside a week—certain! Will you do that?"

"No," was the firm reply. "I'm not going to bother. I've told the auctioneer people to come in and catalogue——"

"Look here," repeated the other, almost entreatingly. "Any one 'ud think I wasn't an old pal. Now, take it from me, Mr. Murgatroyd, as a man who's knocked about more than you have, you'll be sorry later on. What's the good of carrying on a reckless game like this, just because the old man's left you the stuff instead of money? My old man never left me anything! Why, you ought to get five hundred, at the very least, for that lot—all them old clocks, brass affairs, and silverware. I tell you, I know something about these hole-and-corner auctions. You won't see ninepence value in the pound. Why not? Because the public don't get a look-in—not at that sort of auction. The dealers roll up in strength and form a 'ring,' and scoop up the lot, and share out afterwards between themselves. Don't they?" he asked, turning in his excitement for corroboration from anybody near—this being Mr. Kingdom.

"That's a living fact," said the latter, impressively. He had, indeed, been on the point of chiming in without invitation. "That is so," he reiterated to Mr. Murgatroyd; "that's straight as a gun from him to you, mister; and I ought to know what I'm saying. I'm in the very line

myself—or have been. At least, that is, if I happened to catch quite right what you're talking about—old clocks and brasses, and so forth. I deal in 'em myself, if they're cheap and worth lookin' at."

They looked at him, and then at each other. "You do?" Mr. Murgatroyd asked, doubtfully. Mr. Kingdom had already appraised him as a bit of a mule and jackass combined.

"I do," he confirmed. "And I've never been 'done' in bis'ness yet, if that's anythin'; but I can see *you* bein' fleeced and carved up. Here's my card. Good enough to go by, ain't it?—J. Kingdom. Established sixty years. Antiques a specialty. Old gold and silver of any description bought for cash.' Take it!—have a look at it; it don't bite!"

"There you are!" said the younger man, spitting derisively. "Look at that! I said I could find fifty customers in a week—and here's a likely buyer within two yards of you. And yet you'd go and sink the lot in a twopenny-ha'-penny auction!"

"He'd be robbed and left in the gutter," pronounced Mr. Kingdom. "What's his idea?"

"Well," said Murgatroyd, with some hesitation and coughing, "I don't doubt your bona-fides, but this is my private——"

"Private be blowed," struck in his friend. "You want the money; what does anything else matter? There's nothing in it!" he explained to the bulge-eyed Mr. Kingdom. "On the strength of the old man having money, he'd run up a lot of debts. Old man's pegged out—money left elsewhere—my chum here gets the houseful of goods instead. Now he's huffy, and playing the fool; wants to sell the house and goods and clear off, all within twenty-four hours. Stark madness, I call it."

"You ain't far out, either," decided Mr. Kingdom. "That's a extra silly way o' losing money, that is. Why,

what was the—er—partic'lar articles you thought o' takin' round Clerkenwell or Hatton Garden—if you don't mind me overhearin'."

Mr. Murgatroyd, after more dubiety, consulted a compiled list from his waistcoat pocket.

"Well," he said, "I don't know what there is or isn't yet. I know there's two or three sets of solid old candlesticks, some vases and statuettes—you don't want any feather-beds, or anything of that sort, do you?—some old jewelry, one or two watches——"

"Watches ain't no good," put in Mr. Kingdom, who had been listening eagerly. "Not without they're gold or thick silver cases. Better tell you that at the outset, mister. Pawnbrokers take out the works and sell 'em by the sackful."

"There you are again!" exclaimed the young and dark one, with outflung hand. "What did I say? He was going to pawn the lot for what he could get at first, and knew very well he wouldn't redeem 'em."

"Absolutely ridic'lous," said Mr. Kingdom, with an eye on the list—which, however, Mr. Murgatroyd stuffed back impatiently into his pocket. "Well, now, what about it, you gents? Not my affair, o' course; but bis'ness is bis'ness any day o' the week. Would you like me to call round and cast my eye over 'em? No harm done whatever. I pay down in cash on the nail if there's anythin' goin' really reasonable—I've done it for Lord knows how many years—I can't say more. What d'you think? Can't hurt me, and can't hurt you, can it? The main point is that you won't 'best' me in a bargain, and I don't want to 'best' you."

"Couldn't say when I should be there," cogitated Mr. Murgatroyd. "I'm not living there—I'm in rooms myself."

"Well," urged Mr. Kingdom, sinking his voice—two of the bar "regulars" having just appeared. "Well—stand

back here a bit, as it's private—fetch a few o' the things round to my place, then, and go into it there. Could you manage that, mister? You've got my card. Any time you like, within reason. What about to-morrow?"

Murgatroyd thought a bit, and looked at his watch.

"Let's see; I'm done at the office at five. Yes, I could pack up a few, and bring 'em round to your house at seven o'clock, say. The only thing is, I don't know what they're worth myself——"

"Oh, that's all right," said Mr. Kingdom, almost fatherly. "That's all right; I'm in the bis'ness; I should take care o' myself, you needn't fear. And if you don't like my market price, you can up and say so. What fairer? Well, that's 'on,' then—that's bis'ness—seven o'clock at my place to-morrow night?"

"Well, if I say it is, I mean it," said Mr. Murgatroyd. "Good-night for the present, at any rate; I'll think it over. No harm done, as you say."

He moved toward the door. The younger, darker man paused to swallow down the refreshment that, in his stress, he had quite overlooked; and over the glass his eye caught Mr. Kingdom's.

"Bit for yourself, if it comes off," strained the latter, from the corner of his mouth.

"That's all right," he laughed. "I owe him a fiver, and I want to make it fifty."

"Oh, I see!—I see!" breathed Mr. Kingdom, with something so akin to a pregnant chuckle that the barmaid could hardly believe her eyes and ears.

"Pretty boy, isn't he?" she ventured to remark, as she felt at her hair.

"Pretty?" he echoed, astounded. "Who?—which?"

"Why, your friend—the dark one with curly hair and nice teeth. Taking way with him."

"My friend?" Mr. Kingdom muttered. "What's she

mean—what's she chewin' about? I dunno the feller from Adam."

"Oh, beg pardon—sorry I spoke. That's the one that did the whistling 'turn' at the supper a few weeks back—made sure you knew him. They've called in this bar several times just lately."

"I do wish wimmen 'ud mind their own bis'ness." said Mr. Kingdom, as he turned deliberately round on his stool and left her smiling at the amorphous outlines of his back view.

CHAPTER XXII

AT five minutes to seven, that next evening, Mr. Kingdom turned the single gas-light in his shop a little higher, rubbed his hands, and surveyed the outlook through the window. This window was just sufficiently clean to show him that rain had commenced, and that umbrellas were up.

"Thought so," he said, with a grunt. "Wouldn't be natural if it didn't get back to south-west and snivel somehow. S'pose that'll give him an excuse for not coming near. . . . No—here they are, both of 'em."

Mr. Murgatroyd and his friend, carrying a good-sized leather bag apiece, had just crossed the road briskly, and paused to look in at the window-stock, as if to assure themselves of the nature of the establishment. As they turned and entered, Mr. Kingdom emerged from his room at the back with a lit cigar and an air of having quite forgotten.

"Oh, ay, it's you!—what we were talking over, of course," he recollected, snapping his finger and thumb together. "Step in, gents—this way! Nice drop o' rain again; they do keep the tap turned on up there, don't they?"

Heavily jocose, he rolled on ahead into the rear apartment and waved a hand. He had cleared a table and dusted a chair in advance; otherwise the room, both as to odor and general arrangement, justified a word of excuse.

"Here's my office, gents. It ain't what you'd call a boudoir, because I don't let any one touch it; but it's like

me—old-fashioned and solid. Solid people don't need to make a show, do they—let's see, I forget your name, mister?—ah, Murgatroyd! Very good name, too! And don't forget, gents, you can say all you want and do anythin' you like, in here; I'm quite private. I'll just close both the doors, and then. . . ."

The assurance seemed politic, as Murgatroyd had a hesitant and suspicious look still. Stepping back, Mr. Kingdom felt quite relieved, as one of the bags was lifted to the table, and a clasp unlocked. He rubbed his hands again, concealing a little pardonable elation. It was undoubtedly a long, long time since he had done business on any scale worth mentioning, and the weight of the bags lent the thing almost a "wholesale" aspect. Meanwhile he had a good look at something upon Mr. Murgatroyd's finger.

"Nice little ring you've got there, mister," he observed. "Mind me stoopin'? Yes, that was worth a bit—in the times when that sort o' ring was worn. Not now, of course."

"Antique, ain't it?" asked the dark, younger man.

"Jest so," explained Mr. Kingdom. "That's jest where it is. A ring ain't like a fiddle or old furniture—it's on'y a curiosity when it gets as old as that. What are you goin' to do, mister?—turn 'em all out in a heap, I s'pose, and get me to put a figure for the lot as it stands?"

"Well, no," said Mr. Murgatroyd, to his disappointment. "I've had another buyer after me to-day, only I thought I'd keep to my word. What I thought was, if you mention your top price for each article, my friend here could keep an account, and see how much it comes to. Then p'raps we shouldn't stick out to a sovereign on either side."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Kingdom, rather disliking the off-hand reference to sovereigns. "I understood you was in a hurry and wanted the money—that's why I spoke.

Go ahead, then—we ain't bound down to anythin' either way."

Murgatroyd went ahead—unrolled a cloth and shook out several silver pickle and dessert forks, very massive, and of ornate design.

"How much?"

"How much, eh?" repeated Mr. Kingdom sepulchrally. "I'll see when I've looked, but I don't hold out much hopes. . . . No, not much, mister, as you ask the question straight. They're all odd, if you notice; and then, look how silver's gone down in every way. A good many people won't look at it, and prefer pewter. I chance ten bob, and melt 'em down some time or other."

"I'll put it down, anyway—ten bob," said the younger man hastily, as his friend seemed inclined to bridle. "You can think it out afterwards, can't you?"

"It's money, whatever it is, ain't it?" enlarged Mr. Kingdom, with encouragement. He was two pounds to the good as a beginning, he calculated. "You can't take a thing anywhere and get its full value, can you?"

"Full value be damned," said Mr. Murgatroyd, tartly. "I'm not giving them away for prize-packets, if that's what you thought. What about this?"

"This" was a small timepiece. Mr. Kingdom satisfied himself that it was really marble, with a genuine "going" interior, and mentally valued it, on a discreet conservative basis, at three-pounds-fifteen.

"Well," he said, re-lighting his cigar, "I couldn't tell exactly it was this sort o' mixed stuff you had, but we won't haggle over it now you're here—fourteen-and-six!"

"Fourteen-and-six," wrote the other man, before Murgatroyd could gasp. "You're over the pound already, anyway; that's something. Next!"

Murgatroyd unsnapped a trinket case, and drew out a long string of small pearls.

"I didn't mean to part with this," he said suppressing

a little emotion; "and I don't know that I shall. You're a bit of a Jew, I can see at the outset. If you don't know real pearls when you see 'em, I'll keep 'em till I get a wife of my own."

"Tut, tut, don't get flustered, mister—don't do that," urged Mr. Kingdom with some warmth of his own. "It's your stuff on the one hand, I'll admit—but it's my hard-earned money on the other, ain't it? Well, then, don't let's have any talk o' that sort here. No man's ever 'done' me in bis'ness yet, but there's no 'Jew' about me. If you like to let me look at it, I'll say what it's worth—to me, that is. I've got to chance whether I shall ever live to sell 'em again, haven't I? Well, then—! . . . Yes, they're pearls all right; but of a kind. Mark you, of a kind! If you took this little lot to a jeweler's shop, mister, he'd hand 'em back. And why? Because they're all too small to be used for anythin' else; and wimmen won't stand that. The only thing that counts in pearls is—size. Look at 'em! They'd hang all right on a Chris'mas tree; but if I was to go upstairs and offer 'em to my missis as a necklace, she'd say I was off my onion to buy 'em."

"Hand 'em back, then," said Murgatroyd, with a caustic smile. Mr. Kingdom did not seem to hear it.

"But as they *are* pearls," he went on, "and you've come all this way and don't want the trouble of hawkin' 'em round the place, I'll make you the biggest fair offer I dare run to—jest as a 'spec.' What's your total on the paper there?—twenty-four and six? Well, then, lay the pearls jest here, and I'll make the total five pun' level at a bang. And if that ain't a sportin' offer, I dunno what is."

Murgatroyd seemed adequately impressed; at any rate, he merely wiped his forehead, and dived into the bag again. Mr. Kingdom's eyes, which he tried to keep from protruding too noticeably, glistened as out came a noble-

looking silver coffee-service, richly chased, elaborately turned and fluted.

"Well, you did the thing handsome up at your old man's house, mister," he was constrained to remark—if only to dispel unfavorable impressions. "That, now, that's a bit o' somethin' good—*pro*-vidin' you could run up against anybody who fancied 'em, and had other furniture to match. They wouldn't sell down this end o' the world, not if I offered a ton o' coffee with 'em. I should have to do the same as you—go round and find a private customer for 'em. And if he offered me a couple o' quid down, I should reckon, *in* the circumstances, I'd done all right. What d'you say?"

"Make it five," said Murgatroyd, drawing a very deep breath.

"Couldn't be done," said Mr. Kingdom, drawing another. "I can see you'll about clear me out o' floatin' cash as it is. Couldn't be done, my dear feller, or it would be, on the spot."

"Four or nothing," was the short reply. "Looks to me as if we might have saved our bus-fares."

"Three!" said Mr. Kingdom, as with an inward wrench that shook him. "Three; and not a farthin'—there, go on, leave 'em where they are—three-ten; and if you lay on me all night, the pair o' you, you won't squeeze another penny above that!"

"Three-ten!" hastily murmured the dark, younger man, scribbling it down. "Sling 'em out, Mr. Murgatroyd," he advised. "It's a bit o' sentiment with you, no doubt; but we couldn't expect this gentleman to look at it that way. You're both out after the money, that's plain."

Reluctantly Mr. Murgatroyd dropped the coffee-set and produced three massive brass candlesticks—one of odd design.

"We've lost the fellow to that," he deigned to explain; "or else it's mislaid somewhere—I couldn't hit on it in a

hurry to-night. Still, once you've felt the weight of these——"

"Jest so; but I'm afraid that's done it," pronounced Mr. Kingdom, as he proceeded to feel the weight. "A pair with one missin' is like a man with one leg—no good to hisself or anybody else. Better let that little lot go in as makeweight and say no more about it, mister. What's the next?"

Mr. Murgatroyd, evidently not so recklessly indifferent as he had seemed overnight, stood and swore.

"What d'you take me for?" he demanded pertinently, pointing to the candlesticks. "Makeweight?—solid brass?—what d'you mean? Why, you're a downright bester—a bilker. Why, if I took those things to what they call a 'thieves' receiver,' he'd give me a sovereign for them, and glad of the chance. You!"

"P'raps so," said Mr. Kingdom, waving him down. "But you've got to get hold of a thieves' receiver, haven't you? That's the tickler. No need to shout, my dear feller, I'll let myself go a bit, and say ten shillin's. No more, no less. You don't seem to understand that this is a 'cash down' bis'ness; that's what I mean. Ask your friend here—ask him whether he knows any man in London who'll shell out pounds by the minnit as I'm doin'."

"Ten shillings!" scribbled the friend. "Don't quarrel, you two. If you go on like this, you won't open the other bag at all."

"I'll see I don't," said Mugatroyd, scowling viciously. "I'd sooner let 'em go for nothing than stand here and be 'had' barefaced like this."

"Well, you'll excuse me, but you're a more singular party even than I thought," was Mr. Kingdom's emphatic rejoinder. "If you go on like this, as your friend says, I can see you filin' your bankruptcy papers. What have you got there?—bring it out. Here, I'll stand back this time; let's hear what *you'd* think it's worth, if you'd

got to buy it and didn't want it. Now then—jest as a friendly experiment—go on!"

This was an astute stroke. Mr. Murgatroyd turned and turned a large brass-and-wedgwood inkstand in his hands. He seemed to think it solid gold, and yet to be unable to conjecture a reasonable value.

"Thirty bob," he blurted out.

And Mr. Kingdom bent over the table in a spasm of chuckling that nearly choked him.

"There you are!—what did I say? You'll kill me, my dear feller, if you don't mind. Thirty bob! You could go and buy it new down the road for seven-and-six. But I'll only knock off a shillin'—I don't care!—six-and-six!"

"Take it," said Murgatroyd, with another deep breath; and he jerked his inkstand across the table. Mr. Kingdom gasped inwardly, but, save for a little mottling of his putty-hued cheeks, kept his countenance very creditably. He saw an easy three-hundred-per-cent profit on the inkstand alone.

"Ah, vases!" he murmured. "I dunno as they're any good to me. I'm overloaded with 'em, as it is. Any cracks? What d'you suppose they'd fetch at a knock-down price?" Without being much of an expert in vases himself, he saw at a glance what they would be worth to himself at the very lowest computation, and promptly divided that sum by five. "Five bob, eh?"

"Try fifteen," said Murgatroyd, wiping his forehead significantly again. "You can see what they are, can't you—Japanese affairs? Don't insult the bloomin' things as you've insulted me."

"Well, I won't," conceded Mr. Kingdom, not at all resentful. "We'll split the difference for once, and say ten. If that ain't meetin' you half-way, mister, may I never know what is." He pushed the vases carelessly aside. "Don't want to lump that old ring in with the rest,

do you?" he inquired, as if he was sparing the other's undue sensitiveness.

"Why not?" backed up the younger man, for his own reasons. "What's it matter about being a heirloom? The old man won't know, now he's gone, will he?"

"I should say not," opined Mr. Kingdom, promptly. "Anyway, he can't kick up a fuss—that's the thing. And he done you out o' your money, didn't he? None too parental, like, was it? When I go, my son 'll come in for what there is; that I will say."

Murgatroyd reflected gloomily, and consulted his watch.

"Never mind about your son," he said. "If he's anything like you, he won't want it. Look here, I don't see why you should have the cream off everything. Are you going to make me a bid for the feather-beds—three of them—and a case of bound books, and a mahogany sideboard, and the pictures, as well?"

"I might," replied Mr. Kingdom, cautiously. "It 'ud be puttin' myself out on your account, but I might go so far as to make an offer if no one else does. Depends on what you're expectin'. There's the cartage of 'em, ain't there? And then, again, where am I goin' to put 'em?—can you see anywhere likely? What's the pictures like? I've got one outside there myself that I'd like to sell *you*—jest the thing for an unmarried man, 'cause his wife mightn't take to it. Anyway, if you like to make an appointment, I could run my eye over 'em, couldn't I? But as you happen to have the ring here on the spot with you, so to speak——"

Murgatroyd took it from his finger and balanced it on his palm. There were three good-sized diamonds sunk in an unusually thick bed of gold.

"Well—there you are—ten pounds," he decided, with a reckless shrug. "Have it or leave it; I'm not anxious.

A pawnbroker would lend me that much, as it's worth double."

Mr. Kingdom examined it closely, little lumps forming and clicking in his throat.

"After all, I dunno whether it's me or you that 'ud pass best for a Jew, mister," he commented; "but I do know you're talking absolutely ridic'lous at the present moment. Seein' I used to buy and sell rings by the score; I can't cheat myself if I tried, can I? What this ring cost, and what it would fetch, is about as different as the color o' your hair and your friend's there. I'll show you why. These are fairish stones, as such stones go; but they ain't cut prop'ly, and they're set about twice as deep as they ought to be. To make any show of it whatever, a jeweler 'ud have to take 'em out, have 'em cut altogether different and lose half their size—make a new ring of it, in fact. Besides, it's a man's affair—and on'y wimmen buy di'monds. It 'ud be what they call a white elephant to any dealer—if not a Jonah. *But,* if you're prepared to look at it in a sensible light, why not say five pounds and be done with it?"

"Lay it there," said Murgatroyd inconclusively, pointing to the table. "I can pretty well see how you made your money. Here you are—a case of cutlery that was never bought under five sovereigns. What are you offering?—ninepence?"

"Cutlery, my dear feller," said Mr. Kingdom, " is a drug in the market, and I'm glad you know it. I once bought a 'line' in cutlery, and was glad to see the last of it. However—notwithstandin' and nevertheless as they say—we ain't goin' to bicker over a shillin' or two. If you put down twelve-and-six for this lot, you've stretched my limit."

And so it proceeded, until the two bags were emptied—and until Mr. Kingdom, whose brain was unquestionably clear on this occasion, computed that upon his table

lay close upon two hundred pounds' worth of miscellaneous valuables, which, it appeared, he had acquired for just forty-seven pounds.

"What! *How* much?" he ejaculated, apparently aghast at learning the total. "Forty-seven *pounds?* Oh, that won't do, mister—that won't do at all! That's big money—that's a lot further than I had any idea o' goin'." He moved ponderously to and fro, adamantine in attitude. "Too much, my dear feller—couldn't be done—where am I goin' to get forty-seven pounds at a minnit's notice? You see for yourself—ridic'lous!"

"Shove 'em all back," was Murgatroyd's brief instruction to his companion. And Mr. Kingdom halted, with a warning finger raised.

"Hold hard—don't be too impetuous and have a fit afterwards, my dear feller. Now, look here, it's a case of man to man, ain't it? You've got your debts to meet, and I've got my vanishin' little capital to consider. What d'you make it—forty-seven pounds? Well, then, here you are!" He turned the key in an ancient-looking safe behind him, and drew out a cash-box. "P'raps it was to be, after all. I've got jest these ten five-un' notes in the place, as it happens—and one of 'em I must keep back for current expenses till I can see my way, mustn't I?—that goes without sayin', don't it? Now, then; leave the bags behind, if you don't want 'em—and give me your receipt for forty-five pounds! Here it is—money down—on the nail—why, perish me, it's a little fortune!"

He was to sustain a shock.

"Very good," said Murgatroyd, coldly. "I know I'm in a hole, and I've let you know it too. I'll take forty-five down—on the clear understanding that I can come to you and buy the lot back within a fortnight, if I'm able."

Mr. Kingdom gazed at him, and then felt out for a

chair, and sank slowly into it. His eyes for the moment resembled those of a dead cod on a fishmonger's slab.

"What?" he ejaculated, feebly. "What's that? What's he say?"

"Don't be idiotic, Mr. Murgatroyd," urged the dark, younger man, looking incredulous himself. "Don't talk for talking's sake; you know very well there's no 'able' about it. In a fortnight—pouf! Take your money. Every farthing of it's mortgaged twice over as it is."

Murgatroyd buttoned his coat and looked very determined.

"You shut up; I know what I'm talking about," he said. "A fortnight isn't much—I thought of making it three months at first. If there's any earthly chance of me buying them back in that time, I'm going to keep it; and that's final."

Several lumps clicked and melted in Mr. Kingdom's throat.

"Buy 'em back—how?" he inquired, steadying his voice as well as he could. "At what price? 'Scuse me, but where am I s'posed to come in?"

"Oh well," said Murgatroyd, thoughtfully, as he brushed his hat on his sleeve, "that's a fair question. I don't suppose for a moment there's any need to answer it; but if I can come back to you for my stuff in a fortnight's time, you can ask me sixty. That leaves you fifteen pounds in pocket over the deal, in any case—for the loan of forty-five, as you might say."

And Mr. Kingdom, who had hitherto suppressed his feelings over an unparalleled scoop, in unprecedented circumstances, sat as if he had ceased to breathe.

"Oh, that's what you had up your sleeve, is it?" he got out, at length. "Call it a loan, eh? That's your idea o' bis'ness is it? D'you reckon, mister, I'm goin' to bind myself down to any such unheard-of arrangement?"

"Mister" evidently thought so, as he stood firm. What

might have happened, seemed uncertain; but just as Mr. Kingdom went to bang his open hand upon the table and explain that he wouldn't be bully-blustered by any one living, he caught a profound wink and a helpful nod from the dark, younger man. It enabled him to pause and grasp that even fifteen pounds was something more than a flash in the pan.

"All right," he announced, rousing with an effort. "Have your own way if you fancy it. What d'you want? —a bit o' paper to that effect, signed, jest as a formality, like?—somethin' you can shove in your weskit pocket and carry about like a throat-lozenge?"

"That's it; just as a formality—in case," assented the other, with his sarcastic smile. "You needn't lose much sleep over it; I'm open to lay you fifty to one about that—and sign the bet, too."

"Oh, all right," repeated Mr. Kingdom, somewhat relieved to hear it. He found a half-sheet of notepaper, thought tensely for a while, and then commenced laboriously to write. "That do you? Is that solicitor-ified enough? . . . Very well; I'll sign it. It means I mustn't try to get a bit o' my capital back for a fortnight—that's all."

"Half a minute!" Murgatroyd, who evidently had method in his eccentricity, produced a sixpenny stamp, and stuck it on. "There, sign it over that. Make it doubly legal, while we're about it. I always like to be on the safe side."

"You do," agreed Mr. Kingdom. "You ain't quite the same man you seem at first sight, mister, I'll admit. There you are, then, and here's your money. Give us your receipt. . . . That's done then. Fourteen days!"

Murgatroyd pocketed the agreement. "Might as well have made it fourteen years," he owned grimly. "Well, we'll say good-night then—or, rather, good-bye. And I wouldn't leave all this stuff lying about."

Mr. Kingdom rose, and tapped a big cabinet behind him.

"That's all right, mister; that's all goin' in here straight-away, for the time bein', under lock and key. And if I don't see any more of you, I'll wish you well out o' your hole; I've took good care never to get in one myself. G'night!—g'night, gents!"

They were gone. He watched them well down the pavement, to make sure of it; then locked the shop door, retreated puffingly to the back room, and made straight for the corner where he kept a case of bottled beer handy for all emergencies. In three gurgling gulps he mastered a pint. Then down he sank, and gazed at the table, limp with the natural reaction.

"Well," he said, as at last he realized and got to his feet, "I told 'em straight no man ever 'done' me yet in bis'ness; but if a man likes to let *me* 'do' *him,* that's his look-out, ain't it?"

CHAPTER XXIII

MIGHTN'T your husband be well, Mrs. Richards?"

Alice Richards, with a sharp little quiver of her breath, paused on the stairs and looked back as if she had heard a question without being able to grasp its import.

Softly as she had flitted from the house, and as softly as she had returned with the little white packet clutched out of sight in her hand, the alert party downstairs, with the instinctive quickness of femininity, had scented something that seemed to warrant inquiry.

"I said, isn't your husband quite the thing in himself?" she enlarged. "I hope you don't mind me going so far as to ask."

"Oh, no—no!" said Alice, coming to herself so far that she was able to give back a smile. "Why should I? What made you—what made you think that he——"

"Well, I only wondered," said the landlady, with the hushed reserve she had adopted ever since it had become clear that her burning interest was not to be satisfied. "We could hardly help hearing him walk about the room over our heads so long last night; and my husband, who never sees anything, had to remark how very pale he was when he came down to the coal-cellar this morning. I didn't notice that myself particularly, because pale people usually do get pitied for no reason; but I hoped I hadn't offended him in any way, as he didn't answer my 'good-morning,' but walked straight by—rather unlike him. Of course, I wouldn't wish to intrude for a

moment—only it struck me that you looked far from well yourself, and I thought Mr. Richards might be worrying about *you*. I'm not above a little natural feeling, as it were—as we *do* live in the same house, as you might say."

"Oh, thank you—thank you!" Alice Richards' whisper answered. It was not at all promising, but far-away and mechanical. The look in her eyes was that of a person listening to two questions at the same time.

For a moment longer she remained still, grasping the balustrade, and gazed down at the woman who stood below there with loosely-folded hands and head poised expectantly sideways. . . . No—no; it was not a woman she could bring herself to confide in, even although her heart seemed full to bursting, and her hands quivered with longing to clutch at hands that might sustain her with the silent pressure of understanding!

She passed on up the stair; and the person below, with a prolonged sniff, withdrew to her own apartments like one snubbed, but not in the least hurt or humiliated.

The sitting-room door was ajar. Alice stood, holding her breath and listening, before pushing it open. Then, with eyes and lips sunny, she burst in, and, without a look around, flung off her hat and jacket.

"Wonder where I'd gone, dear? Only a few minutes, wasn't I? There, now I've got the cotton, I can go straight ahead. Finished your newspaper, dear?"

Victor Richards rose slowly from his chair, looked at her, and sat down again without a word—almost, indeed, as without full recognition of their relationship. Bustling about, she worked her way to his rear, and stood with a hand pressed to her cheek as in an agony of misgiving —watching him—to see if he would speak or turn. But he looked like a man suddenly brought into a strange room, and wondering what it meant—how he had come there. He sat very stiffly, his hands upon his knees, while

he gazed first to right and then to left. Once or twice he appeared to shiver—to try and rid himself of some sensation.

"Have your pipe, dear," said his wife, in her most natural voice, while yet her dark eyes were dilated with the strengthening recurrence of dread. "There it is, just beside you."

As by force of habit he reached up his hand to the mantel-shelf. The hand fell back—without the pipe. He trembled violently, as, with a resolute little rush, she sank to her knees beside him.

"Victor, dear! Victor, boy, what's the matter?"

She framed his face with her fingers and held it turned toward her, looking deeply, steadily, into his eyes. He bore it for a moment—then twisted his head free. His hands drummed upon his knees, as with some inward chafing at his own feelings, which he could not or would not describe.

"Get on!—get on!—get on! On with your work!" he whispered, sharply.

She went across to her sewing-machine. Her foot worked the treadle, the shuttle whirled, the cotton wasted and snapped, her lips moved soundlessly, while she sat gazing into space. Then, as though she had prayed and waited for a response, she drooped her head and brought her concentration to her work. Her sight was blurred, and many voices seemed calling eagerly to her from without—all telling her at once what to do, and how to do it; but she kept determinedly on. It seemed of a sudden a hopeless mockery of toil and endeavor; it seemed that she ought to fling it all away from her, and burst into one broken-hearted cry, and yield up the struggle; but, against this, her faith in an unswerving Watching Eye was deep and unshakable.

Presently Victor Richards got up and walked abruptly from the room. She was upon her feet, listening as for

her life, ready to snatch up her hat and jacket and follow him, if he left the house. The silence of the spell of suspense was pulsed by the iteration of a man pushing a barrow along the quiet street outside; "O-ran-ges! Here's your blood-oranges, three a punny, all sound! Like wine—like wine!"

She stooped over her machine quickly again. Victor was coming back; apparently he had only been into the next room—their bedroom. She wanted to look up, as he paused at the doorway; but for a moment could not. When at length she did, she saw that he had disarranged his clothing—like a child, or an irresponsible old man; but she kept back any moan. The surest way—if any—to preserve his mental equilibrium was to keep so very calm and natural herself! She moved across presently, and remedied the defect with her own fingers, and soothed his head against her breast, and hummed to herself as though she was quite happy.

"Poor Tilly's snowdrops!" she said. "You haven't watered them for quite two days, and they're so dry! When she comes, to-morrow evening, she'll think you've forgotten how wonderful they were. That mustn't be!"

He looked up at her keenly, but still did not speak. She picked up his pipe, as if to examine it casually, and put it to his lips. "Let him have his pipe," Doctor Dempsey had said. "If he likes it, that won't hurt him at all—do him good, in fact." Victor gripped his teeth hard upon the stem, and then drew back as with distaste and surprise.

"You silly devil," he said, shakily. "What are you doing? Get on with your work!"

Alice turned quickly and bent over her "cutting-out" table. Spread across it was a length of rich, dark-green material upon which she had chalked her design for a lady's walking-skirt—part of a costume which was to be "fitted" on its future wearer within the next twenty-four

hours. With a supreme effort she brought her plunging mind back to a study of the plan; and presently—although it seemed that the world had become starkly silent, and that there was a heavy suspension of everything actual and physical in life—took up her long scissors and began to cut along the outer dotted line. . . . With an uncontrollable start she looked up. Something had pressed her arm. Victor was standing over her at the table as she bent.

"Hello, dear," she said, with dry lips. "Going to help me? Just put your hand there. . . . God bless you, dear!"

He had not stirred to help; but she would not notice that. She started again to cut, although her eyes now saw no line. Presently her arm was pressed again; the scissors paused tremblingly.

"Cut it *this* way," he said, pointing diagonally across the material.

"That way, dear? Why?"

"Cut it *this* way," he repeated, with great firmness. "You hear what I say? You're my wife, aren't you?"

For an instant she looked up at him imploringly, incredulously; but his eyes, his pointing finger, did not waver. And in the eyes she read what she had read before. And now her calmness was real enough—the calmness of one who knew that all she could do was to prolong the respite, to call him her own for a little longer.

"Yes, dear—all right! This way!"

Steadily her scissors traveled diagonally, and the walking-skirt in embryo was no more. It had no coherence, no being, no possibilities; it was in two useless strips.

"There, that's all I have to do to-day," she said, with hasty cheerfulness, as she gathered up the ruin and laid it aside. Before he could realize this, she had flung her arms around him and kissed his lips, his eyes, his forehead, vehemently. "Boy!" she whispered cunningly.

"You look so tired, and you are so weary!—neither of us could get our rest last night, could we? Come and lie down on the bed, and wife will hush you off to sleep. Do!"

She ran her fingers softly through his hair, and gradually drew his head down on her shoulder, so that she could move her lips soothingly and lingeringly along his forehead. While she was praying silently for the simple strength to draw him to the bed without breaking the spell—the spell known to some dear, tender women—he drew away, put back her clasp as with resentment, and returned to his chair.

And now—? Alice began to nerve herself—not for the ordeal itself, but for the parting again from all she held precious in life. And yet, deep down in her, a ray of hope still kept shining. She had served God and the man so faithfully, that it seemed this little candle of hope must be kept alight, even now—even now!

"Sit still, dear," she said, hurrying to him as he went to rise again. "Sit still!" She forced him back into the chair with all her strength; and stupefaction held him passive for a moment.

In that moment she got out her little white packet, labeled "Bromide of Potassium," and poised it over a glass partly filled with warm water.

"Twenty grains—twenty grains," she was saying to herself, as she had often done before. "Shall I—shall I—risk it this time—in hopes—to keep him one night more? Oh, shall I?—dare I?"

There were at least fifty grains in the little packet of colorless crystals. But, in all her experience, the prescribed quantity had merely drugged him for a few hours. A whole night—an indefinite spell of heavy sleep—and something might supervene in his condition to keep Doctor Dempsey and the "Overflow" at bay.

She tilted her packet and emptied all the crystals into the water. Then she walked to the chair with it.

"Open your mouth, dear," she said coaxingly. "Drink this—all of it."

He looked at the settling sediment, and clenched his teeth instinctively—combatively. Again she surprised him, by forcing them apart with her fingers.

"Drink this!" she said, commandingly. "Doctor Dempsey's orders!"

The man shook in every fiber of his body, and groped for the glass, and drained its contents, and held a hand to his throat, as the raw, brackish liquid took his breath. Then he looked up at her with scared eyes. As if a magnesium light had flashed through his mental gloom, he seemed to know; to know that *she* knew. For just the moment he was conscious of fighting against himself, and that she was fighting strenuously with him.

"Oh, God, Alice!" he whispered. "What have I been doing? What are you going to do with me?"

"I've made sure that you shall sleep, my precious," she whispered back, stooping over him with a wonderful smile. "Now forget!—leave the rest to Him!"

He began to resist anew, as she drew him to his feet and impelled him toward the door. But already his nerves were slack and his perceptions clogged. By degrees she got him to the bedside, and turned and locked the door behind her. In a second he had sunk heavily down, willing to sleep.

"What?—what?" he protested, as her arms slid beneath him, to lift him again for an instant. "Don't—don't!"

"Doctor Dempsey!" she cried a second time, thrillingly. And he shuddered to partial realization. "Victor!" she called, her face close, her eyes "drawing" his own. "You'll know!—you'll know, if you wake, that your clothes are taken away, and you must ask me for them. You could not move without your clothes. You won't

want to, darling boy—not this time—not this time. Oh, I trust God for that!"

With trembling, but quick, fingers, she drew off all his clothing — she scarcely knew why, save that her knowledge of the man's innate sensitiveness made her hopes catch at any straw, however elusive. As she laid him back, and drew the coverings over him, and kissed his forehead, and listened, he was already dead to his surroundings. She could have sobbed now without fear, but no sobs would come; the deepest agony of all knows them not.

"One night—this one night more! To-morrow I may have to put him from me. To-morrow!"

She knew her duty; she had done it before, and would do it again without shrinking, whatever the cost, because there was no alternative. But she had gained a few hours' respite.

Dusk had come. She had searched his clothes, searched every inch of the room. She had gone back to the sitting-room, opened drawer after drawer, taken calm stock, removed everything that she had reason to fear, and placed them where a man could not find them. At nine o'clock she dared to slip from the house and purchase another packet of Bromide of Potassium. If she had to lose him again, it should only be when she had fought back to her last line of defense.

At midnight, when house and street had grown quiet, he still slept without movement. She sat and watched him. At times she sank to her knees, and prayed again. At times, when he moaned, and his eyes seemed about to unclose, she laid her head against his breast, and held him still, and whispered things that he could not hear, but that yet seemed to soothe him. At six o'clock, when pale fingers of dawnlight were pushing past the ends of the blind, she lay down beside him, her arms

wound about him so tightly that his merest mov would rouse her from her lethargy of faintness.

She had him still! And nobody knew—nobody yet. Till they knew, nobody could come to tak from her.

CHAPTER XXIV

YOU'RE quite sure, mum, there's nothing more you'd like me to do before I go?"

It was five to three, on the following afternoon; and Tilly Westaway had paused on the way up to her room. She was a little breathless and a little flushed already with the strenuous discharge of her duties in a given time; but she was also feeling a glow of gratitude, and she had to let it be known somehow.

The mistress, who was very busy sponging the arched fronds of her pot-palms, came to the door and surveyed her.

"Well, yes, there are a thousand and one things I'd like you to do, Tilly; but that is not the point. If I said you could have from three o'clock till eight to yourself, I certainly meant it. You won't be away by three, as it is."

"That's all right, mum," said Tilly. "The place doesn't open till five for visitors, and I shan't try to crowd in all the other things I'd thought of. What I meant was, I thought it very kind of you to let me 'off' at all, as we've only been back a week, and I did no work to speak of for my money all that time"—She paused, swaying a trifle consciously.

"As long as you are feeling better in health, Tilly—that is everything," said her mistress, with dignity. "And undoubtedly you are."

"Oh, yes, mum," said Tilly. "I'm feeling quite myself again, and it does make everything seem different, mum.

I oughtn't to have let myself get like that, I know—I can see it now——"

"Ah, perhaps you didn't look Above, Tilly," suggested the mistress, who had never had a doubt about her own reserved place in the Beyond.

"Well, p'raps not, mum," owned Tilly, with drooped head. She had wanted an opportunity to explain away her conduct. "But somehow, when you're so knocked by what's gone on below, you can't seem to. I s'pose I'm a funny one; I can be as bright and believing as any one when things are going on swimming, but I seem to go down with a dreadful drop when they're not. I wouldn't like you to think I don't try, mum. I do!" she added, with tears of fervor in her voice.

"I believe you do, Tilly," said the mistress. "Only remember that these dark hours are sent just in order to test us. If we go and fail the moment we are called upon to prove our Belief, then it simply shows that we have none, except in name. You see that?"

"Think so, mum?" faltered Tilly. "My friend thought that if you really tried, and kept on trying, you might give way now and again without—without having it put too hard against you."

"Good gracious, no, Tilly," corrected the mistress, impressively. "Tell your friend that that always seems to me like meeting one's conscience half-way. Why, belief is only spread and upheld by the force of example. Every time the believer fails, the army of unbelievers must be strengthened. Still, we won't go into that now, as the curate's wife might be here at any minute, and I have not finished dressing. You'll arrange, then, to take your full day off according to what happens—as long as you let me know well in time."

"Oh, yes, mum, I will," said Tilly, recovering wonderfully. "It won't be for another fortnight, not if I can

help it; I don't expect too much. Thank you, mum, very much!"

Up to her room at the top she panted—the mistress had found it quite impossible to make her understand that "rushing" even in excitement was unnecessary. In a few minutes she had changed into her neat black dress, and drawn on her hat and cotton gloves of the same hue, and slipped inside one of the gloves a folded letter from her tin trunk. Taking her umbrella — since adopting umbrellas, Tilly had never traveled a yard without one, wet or shine—off she went.

Pink as a peony, she arrived at quiet Canonbury Station—having found that the railroad was preferable to the roundabout bus route. It was trying, once more, to find the station deserted, and no Broad-Street train due for thirteen minutes; but on this occasion Tilly could laugh at her luck.

"It's me all over!—I've never caught a train here yet," the man at the barrier was told. "Ah, well, the fresh air won't do me any harm."

Thirteen minutes on Canonbury Station seem fully thirteen minutes, as a rule; but Tilly hardly noticed them. She admired the name of the station traced in huge letters, formed by white flints, upon the imposing banks; and she was sure she could smell violets somewhere. She looked at the newly-pasted advertisements of seaside resorts, each with its official "record" of Spring sunshine—Oriental skies, turquoise water, benign boatmen, and red people basking upon lemon-like sands—and wondered at the circumstance that these entrancing places seemed reserved for half the world, while the other half had to be content with representations on hoardings. However, this was only a stray reflection. New blood seemed to be running in her veins just lately, and so even the most drab things about her had a tint of some sort.

She got out the letter from her glove, and composed

herself on a seat to peruse it once more. It bore the title and style of Bob Kingdom's Club printed at the head; and she was very proud of this, as giving the communication quite a West-End Society aspect. Besides, it had arrived on a morning when the mistress had no letters at all, and the mistress had seemed quite envious on hearing: "It's only for me, mum—none for you, mum!"

"DEAR MISS W.," the letter ran. She had tried to picture Bob Kingdom in his Club drawing-room, with a gold pen, and a waiter behind him—and failed. "Got yours to hand," it proceeded. "No idea you were in the country. Surprised about the apples and onions, as you say. Apples two a pound here—onions three lbs. twopence. What part might it be? Anywhere near Barnet? Been that far myself. Might do you good, as well as the missis; hope so. Thought her rather a queer party, when I knocked there. How's things? Ran across your brother Giddy short time back. Had a new suit on, but didn't have anything to say. No need to thank me, as you say; didn't know I'd done anything out of the way to speak of; pleased myself, if I pleased you. Mother ditto. Call there any night after seven-thirty, if you're up our way, she says; one or two things for your mother, and ditto to cut down for Giddy; might come in handy at a pinch. Drop a line to R. Kingdom at the Club as per on top, and say what day you thought of going to the asylum place, and what time. Might be strolling past that way as you come out, if not before six-thirty. Busier at work just lately; no slack time now. Enclose shilling postal order; get him a few cigarettes or what not, in with your own parcel. Love to all.

"R. KINGDOM."

Tilly folded it again very carefully. Her eyes dimmed each time, while yet she smiled, as she reached that unvarying "Love to all." Evidently Bob Kingdom deemed

it the correct thing, without which no respectable letter could be said to be complete.

"Great big Bob!" she whispered to herself, as she gathered up her bag and umbrella. "Can't see his own heart—he doesn't know it matches his body. Never mind about the brains — they're nothing. You can't have both."

In due course she reached Broad Street, and thence, by means of two brief bus journeys, arrived at the "Overflow," surprised to see it once again by daylight, and to observe how much less forbidding it looked than when the tall arc-lamps threw the greater part of it into somber, sinister shadow.

"And here we are again," she said, as she joined the group already waiting by the door under the arch — mostly carrying small packages. "They can't say we forget 'em altogether, can they?"

"Don't talk about it," confirmed a woman with a black shawl and beaded bonnet, nodding a mournful recognition. "Dunno about you; but I have to come three miles, tram it or tramp it; and I'm sure I no sooner get over the day and say to myself 'There, that's done with!' than round it comes again—quicker'n any washing-day, I always do say. But if I didn't come, who would? It's like having to come up and show yourself reg'lar. He'd turn round on me and say I'd got married afresh, or something o' that, if I didn't."

"Isn't he any better—your husband?" inquired Tilly, to cheer her.

"Better?" she echoed. "There's nothing the matter with him, except that he thinks every day's a beanfeast, and the pubs. are all free. I had him home again on trial for a bit—did I tell you?—but I was glad enough to pack him off again, hard as it seems to say it to any one that hasn't been through it. Better? It just suits him, with nothing to do, and his meals put down in front

of him. It's me that wants the rest and proper food, and can't get it. Why, bless you, the doctor said to him as solemn as could be: 'Now, Hawkey, it rests with yourself a good deal. If you go touching another drop of anything, and run past yourself, you'll be back here inside twenty-four hours.' Well, I'd hardly got him down the road here a hundred yards, before he spotted a pub.—smelt it, you might say. D'you think I could get him past it? Not till he'd ordered two mild-and-bitters and drunk 'em both hisself. And the best of it was, I knew he hadn't a farthing on him to pay. *I* wasn't going to! I waited till they'd said a few words to him, and he'd said a few back—he jest laughs anything like that off as a joke, you know—and then I lugged him off home quick. And I clapped him in a chair and gave him such a talking to! I says: 'You're as fat as a Chris'mas bullock, and able to work if you keep your wits; and yet you'd guzzle yourself back into the "Overflow," and let me wear myself away into the grave making soldiers' shirts at threepence apiece, and find my own thread and trimmings.' 'Not me, old gel,' he says. 'Now I've broke the ice with a taster, I'm going straight as a die; I ain't going back there any more. I love you too much, old gel,' he says. That was on Sat'day. On Sunday he could only wangle a couple o' pints; but on Monday, while I was taking my work back to the factory, he started strong. 'Where's your hat?' I says, when I got home. Blessed if he hadn't sold it for threepence. On Tuesday he let his coat and weskit go; on Wednesday he was walking about in his trousers and socks. On Thursday it would have been his pants—only he don't wear 'em. Anyway, I could see *my* clothes bein' torn off my back and follerin' suit. But I stuck his capers till the next Sat'day—although I was s'posed to have him home for a month. Then the woman next door to me says: 'Here, hi, Mrs. Hawkey; he's sold your mangle,

I hear; and a man's comin' to fetch it while you're out o' Monday. I should jib at that, if I was you.' And that done it. Jib I did. I trapesed back here, and told 'em I'd had enough of Hawkey out on his own; and they sent a feller to fetch him away there and then. Gracious me, he'd have had the lath and plaster off the walls, and sellin' it for a penny a sack, at the finish. What are you goin' to do with a man like that, however much you want him home? I'm what you might call a one-eyed widow; and I can't see any hopes for myself."

Tilly murmured that it was hard to know just what to do for the best in such circumstances.

"Was he always fond of it?" she asked, more in sympathy than with any desire to probe that topic.

"Fond of it?" said the person. "Well, I shouldn't mind *that;* that's only natural, as you might say. But you have to draw the line somewhere. To have to lead him home at half-past twelve every night, and then keep awake till five o'clock to shake the life into him and bung him off to his work—well, you don't want more'n about ten years of that off the reel. But, mind you, it wasn't the drink that brought him here in the first place. Oh, dear, no! " She bridled a little, and drew the ends of her shawl tightly together. "Oh, dear, no! I'll give him his due: he could take any amount; and the more he had, the more loving he was; which shows that he had a good heart at bottom—for you can always size up a man's real nature by makin' him drunk. Why, Doctor Dempsey himself says, says he: 'He could have gone on drinkin' till he was eighty, so long as he kept to ale alone, and ate his food as well; but if he *will* mix 'em—well!' No, it wasn't the drink that landed him here. Only, one night, when he'd got his full load o' beer on, he slipped up somehow and managed to hit the back of his head. I shouldn't have known of it, if I hadn't found the bump stickin' right out by accident;

he didn't know anythin' about it hisself. Well, that did it—left him looney, on and off. One day we found him roamin' about the street the same as when he was born; and it happened again; and at last the p'liceman said he couldn't have any more of *that*. So they got a magistrate's order, and carted him off. He went like a lamb, too! I paid for a cab, and told him I was goin' to take him to the 'White City' if he behaved himself; and before he knew where he was, he was in here, and *had* to behave himself. Nearly broke my heart, though, when I heard these nasty gates click on him, and found myself outside." She wiped her eyes, anyway. "Well, never mind; if it's only a pint o' beer stands between him and his liberty and wife, and he prefers the pint, I can't help him, can I?"

The crowd had swelled. Pretty soon came the leisurely step within; the key turned, the gate went back, and the visitors swarmed across the paved space toward the building beyond.

"Once more!" said Tilly, vaguely thrilled as she found herself seated in the narrow long room, and all the memories of previous occasions rushed back upon her. "Only think what's happened, since I was last here. Only think! No, I won't think about it at all. . . . James Westaway, if you please!"

"If he'll come, you mean," said the attendant, with a shrug.

"Anything—anything worse the matter with him?" ventured Tilly, with a gulp.

"Oh, no," he said, scratching his head. "But he's got a little will of his own, that's all."

"I want him *very* particularly this time," said Tilly, earnestly. "I shan't forget you; I know how trying it is."

"Ah!" said the man, lightly. "Glad some one knows it. A change to hear it."

"We're both in the same boat," whispered an aged lady with silver hair in the next niche, bending toward Tilly. It was always remarkable how common cause made old acquaintances of utter strangers in this room. "My dear son won't always come through to see me; and when he does, he won't say a syllable. It's very hard, when I've given all my life for him, as one might say."

"Poor thing!" said Tilly. "I wouldn't cry!—p'raps he will this time. Young, is he?"

"Oh, no, dearie; he's thirty-eight, and married, with the dearest little baby girl you ever saw; but his wife doesn't come—she couldn't bear to; it's broken her down completely. Ah, when I think of what a bright lad he was, and all he was going to do for mother—! . . . He's bitter, dearie—very bitter, when he can think. He worked hard, but fell ill, and lost his position. He could get nothing from that day to do; his home was sold up; he could go into the workhouse, if he liked to part with his wife and his self-respect—but that was all. I starved myself to help them, but it was no use; and he went raving mad with misery at the finish. Whatever they say, dearie, and even in this country, there is no crime punished so cruelly as the crime of being in want."

Tilly was about to open her own heart, but caught sight of Mr. Chambers furtively begging brace-buttons a little higher up the room, and sank back into her niche. After a minute she caught a smile from some one opposite, and smiled warmly back. It was the daughter of the jovial inmate who did not wish to quit the precincts, and who was explaining cheerfully once more that he had become very valuable—indispensable, indeed—as he assisted in preparing the vegetables and making the beds.

"They've as good as told me—they can't do without me!" he finished, chucklingly. "So there you are!—that ends it,"

Presently the daughter got up and stole across to Tilly.

"I felt I must," she breathed. "I've so wanted to ask what has become of that lady friend of yours—that dark one with the sad face and such sweet, speaking eyes. I have not seen her for months and months; we often talk about her. Her husband, wasn't it? We couldn't bear to look at her, when he came in. You could seem to see her heart breaking—yes, that's the one!"

"Alice!—Mrs. Richards!" breathed Tilly back, with a tingle of delight. "Why, didn't you know? Oh, he's back home with her, and perfectly well again—long ago. Of course, it's a struggle for her, as she won't think of him working just yet; but you wouldn't believe how happy they are. Oh, I often see them! I'm so glad you asked; I must tell her; she'll be so pleased!"

"Do!" begged the other. "Give my love to her—although I never once spoke to her except in my mind. I could feel more for her than I could on account of my own dad; because he doesn't seem to mind. Doctor Dempsey has been very good all along, but he says now it's as good as hopeless to hope. Here's what he was kind enough to write to mother, when she wrote and said how cheerful he always seemed, and couldn't be really bad." She produced a crumpled piece of note paper. " 'Incapacity to realize his position, or to profit from experience, is the surest sign that he is in the right place here; and if I persuaded the guardians to discharge him merely on the grounds that he appears quite harmless, I should add to my already heavy responsibility.' Isn't he thorough? Doesn't he take pains, considering that he is pestered with letters and appeals every day?"

"Yes; and I've got to ask to see him to-day," confessed Tilly, rather sinkingly. "I mustn't talk about it, or I shan't be able to do it; but it's got to be done."

"Wish you luck!" whispered the other, stealing away again. "Don't look up—here's Chambers!"

It was too late. Mr. Chambers, taking advantage of an air of leniency upon the part of the attendants, was not to be abashed by the fact that Tilly shook her head—nor that, being a woman, she was not likely to be wearing his particular kind of button.

"Ah!" he said. "If you're not the very one I wanted to see! I've been wondering where you'd got to all this time. Where's the General? Wasn't that the General who came with you before?—a very big party? I thought so; I'm seldom wrong!" Tilly, unwilling to rebuff him, had been inveigled into a nod. "Well, now," he said, seating himself confidentially close, "you tell him from me that I must have money, or I can't go on. Money at once!"

"You're not the only one," Tilly told him, with a smile and a sigh. "If I had money, I'd see that my poor brother wasn't here another day, I do know!"

"Who's your brother?" Mr. Chambers knitted his brows in reflection, thinking possibly that he was on the track of a likely victim. "Where is he? Why hasn't he fallen in with the rest?"

"That's what I want to know," said Tilly. "I'm going to wait here till he does, somehow or other. You know my brother—Jimmy!"

"Jimmy?—ah, yes!" recollected Mr. Chambers, biting his thumb in the effort till it bled, and then gazing at it in surprise. "Ah, you mean 'Happy'—because he won't talk, and won't let any one come near him. I'm rather afraid I shan't get much out of him. I shall have to get him into a quiet corner, and tell him what you say. What ransom did you think of fixing, now?"

"Ransom" was a little beyond Tilly. She was more intent upon discovering whether Jimmy ate his food or not.

"What makes him so fearful thin, Mr. Chambers?" she inquired, like a conspirator. And he sat up, thinking hard.

"Well, I should say—blackbeetles."

"What?" gasped Tilly.

"He chases 'em, doesn't he?" asked Mr. Chambers, eyebrows lifted. "That's what he's here for, isn't it? Didn't you know the camp was overrun with beetles—long, hairy ones with eyes at both ends?"

"Oh, do be quiet," said Tilly, feeling sick. "I'm sure he doesn't do anything of the kind."

"Ah," qualified Mr. Chambers, deeply, "perhaps I'm thinking of policemen—not beetles. Here, you haven't got such a thing as a button on you, have you?—one like this? Not too loud!—they don't like me putting too much into the bank. Have a look, while I lean over you; undo something!"

"Look here," said Tilly, very earnestly, "I took the last one off yesterday. Now, if you only wait till I come again, I'll bring you all I can lay my hands on—beauties! I won't forget. I'll put 'em—" She sprang up, feeling involuntarily, gratefully, in her pocket for a sixpence she had had ready. "Here he is!"

The attendant had just swung the farther door, and signaled in her direction. Jimmy Westaway, sheepish and unwilling, and blinking at the filled room, appeared.

CHAPTER XXV

THANK you so much!" Tilly whispered, as she reached the spot. "I am a bother to you, I know. On the table here—just a trifle—if you wouldn't mind! Come along in, Jimmy, do!" She got a hold upon his sleeve, and drew him to the nearest chair. "There, never mind about the other people—they're not looking at you; they've got quite enough to think of without that. It is cruel of you to go on like this; I've been waiting over half an hour again, although I had something to tell you that ought to brighten you quite up!"

Jimmy looked furtively beyond her down the room. Clearly some secondary idea had prompted him to reconsider his reluctance.

"Where's the other—Kingdom?" he jerked out.

"Oh, you remember that, do you? You remember the very name, can you?" breathed Tilly, struck by the fact. "There, now, look at that!—and yet you make out you don't take any interest in anything or anybody. Whatever made you think he was coming with me again?"

"Apples," said Jimmy briefly, candidly, after the inevitable pause.

"Oh, I see—the apples. Well, now, if I'd only thought of it, I'd have brought—no, I wouldn't," she corrected, as a useful warning. "You ran off with 'em, didn't you? And you ate 'em more like a wolf than a human being, didn't you? It's so silly, Jimmy; because you've only got to act sensibly, and say you're all ready for work, and they couldn't keep you here. Don't you think you *could* do a little something light, if you tried?"

Jimmy seemed disinclined to think about it at all, and turned the subject quite cleverly.

"Where's mother?"

"Oh, she's all right—bonny!" hastily said Tilly, her heart taking a plunge as she opened her bag to avert a possible similar question. It had been left solely to Tilly to decide that there was no pressing need for Jimmy to hear that he stood for the only "James Westaway" now. "No, I haven't brought you anything at all this time except a few cigarettes—and I'm sure I don't know why I keep bringing them, because they're not filling, and I can't see why you want to draw in smoke just to puff it out again. The man at the shop must think I'm a sly smoker myself. But, there, I s'pose you wouldn't feel yourself a real man, if you didn't do what other men do. You're a queer lot altogether, you men, what with your shaving, and smoking, and breaking your voice when you're about fourteen—I never did! Here, what do you think? I had a letter from mother last week—not a very long one; but, still, her idea of a letter from home—five lines, and then 'Your loving mother till the next.' Poor mother, she does hate pen and ink. Why, Giddy's got a job—morning and evening. He takes out papers. I reckon he sells more than all the rest put together—you know how he can run, when he likes!"

"Don't run as far as here," was Jimmy's unexpectedly clear remark.

"My goodness, no!" thought Tilly to herself. "They'd very likely keep him, at sight. Sit down, make yourself comfortable!" she urged aloud. "You're not like anybody else—all on wires. Look at your finger-nails! Let me cut 'em. . . . Oh, all right, if you won't. Bring out your voice, then!—anything to show you're alive. Why don't you ask me how I am, and how I'm rubbing along? You know I've been out in service getting on for a year, now. Don't say you don't!"

"What's service?" muttered Jimmy at length, driven to it, as she kept a grip on his coat.

"Why, you know! I'm in a big house — ten large rooms, and eight of 'em full of furniture. I do the work there; and, my word, it is work. Most of the houses there have two or three servants; but I s'pose mistress thinks she ought to go careful, so as she can do good in other ways. I don't get the chance to stroll about and smoke cigarettes like you do here; I have to 'go' from six in the morning till half-past ten at night. It 'ud kill some o' you strong men."

"What d'you do it for?" jerked Jimmy, with another timed tug at his coat.

"Do it for? My living, of course. Sit still, now!—I don't mind you asking the why and the wherefore. If you'd only bring your mind to work a bit, I believe you'd make a regular bull-fighter in a few months. I don't say I like it, after having the run o' the streets all my life; but you *must* do something, Jimmy!—or else what did God give us hands and legs for? Look at my hands beside yours—like slabs o' red beef against white celery, ain't they? I'm sure, you ought to buck up and say to yourself: 'Out o' this place! I'm going to earn money, and keep myself! Out I go, on the spot!'"

Jimmy glanced sideways at her in covert amazement for any such proposition, and thought it time the topic was turned again.

"Whose house is it?" he managed to ask.

"The lady's, of course; my mistress," she informed him, believing that she was succeeding where Doctor Dempsey had failed. "It's a lovely place, Jimmy—you ought to make up your mind to come and see it for yourself. I felt as if I ought to take my boots off, when I first stepped over the mat. There's a room with a glass ceiling at the back, full of palms; it takes the mistress hours a day to see they're not dying. And then there's

the master. I don't see much of him, of course—I keep out of his way, because he can't bear the sight of housework, and seems to turn 'all over' if I answer the bell with a smudge o' soot on my face. Of course, he's a gentleman, and always wears black and a brown beard and gold glasses; and works in the City, and seems to come home just when he fancies. I shouldn't like to think what money he earns, or how they make out he earns it like that, when I do fourteen hours a day, Sunday and all, for five-and-nine. But, still, the mistress is very nice—especially if you do all she likes done, and don't leave things on the stairs or anything of that. I've got a room all to myself, Jimmy—although I don't see much of it; you might say I've got a suite, as they leave the kitchen all to me, and I have the run of the breakfast-parlor, next to it. I didn't tell you where it is, did I? Highbury! You wouldn't believe how I felt, when I first went there. All the streets so wide and clean, and so quiet, and no women leaning over the railings to chip the party opposite—nothing of that. Sometimes at night, when you see a policeman coming along, you feel you have to cross to the other side of the road, as there's nobody but you in his way, and anything might happen. Oh, and I haven't told you!—I've been in the country with 'em for a month. A month, mind you! Well, if *you'd* been there—I wish you could have been—you'd have thought yourself lost on the great So-ho Desert. What d'you think of that?"

"I've been," muttered Jimmy, to get rid of her.

"You haven't!" declared Tilly. "I don't mean like Chingford, where you went with the Sunday-school excursion and lost your coat once. No roundabouts or cocoanuts or tea-gardens, or anything o' that. Oh, all right, then, I won't tell you, if you don't want to hear. What d'you keep pulling for?—what d'you want to do? You don't want them to think that you *are* balmy, do

you? Well, then, be sensible just this once. Now, look here!" She hooked his arm, and pressed it.

"Don't go saying nobody loves you, or wants you. I'm going to see Doctor Dempsey. Guess what about?"

Jimmy certainly pricked up a trifle, and moved the arch of his skull to and fro automatically—a muscular eccentricity he shared with Gideon; but guessing implied exertion, and he declined.

"I'm going to get you out for a day. A whole day!" said Tilly, with reproachful sadness. "You'll see the trees, and the shops, and the people—see everything! I've thought about it for long enough; now I'm going to ask. And now you know why I haven't brought you anything, and why I'm going to keep back the postal order Mr. Kingdom sent for you. I did think at first of Southend—but that's too crowded, they tell me; you can't hear yourself speak; and besides, that costs money. But I've been asking, and looking at the map, and all sorts of things; and there seems to be a quiet little place called Purfleet, with just a dash of the seaside about it —but, there, you're hardly listening; I might as well save my breath. And to think I've laid awake night after night, wondering how I could do it—oh, Jimmy!"

"Shut up!" said Jimmy, clicking his teeth in impatience. "When is it?"

"Oh, you can come to the point now, can you?" quavered Tilly. "I don't know as I shall say any more about it. Seems always the same—I get 'downed' whichever way I turn for the best. And I was going to spend quite half a sovereign on you, if I could, so as you'd remember the day."

"Show us the money," blurted Jimmy, to whom the concrete evidence was the one thing that mattered.

"Not me," said Tilly. "At least, I might; but as I haven't got it, I can't. I'm not a walking Mint, remem-

ber; I have to wait till I'm paid. You don't suppose I'm saying all this just to plumb you up, do you?"

Jimmy sat comparatively still for a minute, blowing upon his fingers, and unquestionably bringing his mental faculties into operation. Then he rose abruptly.

"Go and ask him now," he said. "You only talk; you don't do anything. Do it now!"

Before Tilly fairly realized, he was gone. She sat for a moment, partly stunned, repeating "Do it now!—do it now!" to herself. Then, while the impulse held, she took her courage in both hands, made a dive, and followed.

Jimmy had vanished; the solemn-looking corridor was quite clear. Fully she expected to hear herself ordered back, and to find herself next moment standing in the street. But no one challenged, no one appeared. With a feeling that she should be tongue-tied when the moment arrived, Tilly went slowly forward, and halted within a few feet of Doctor Dempsey's room, scarcely breathing.

He was in there—yes; she could hear his voice, like that of a calm preacher in a pulpit heard from the vestibule. It went on and on, with only a brief pause now and again. Tilly told herself with awe that some poor thing had come upon the same errand as herself, and was "going through it." Doctor Dempsey must have had nearly enough of passing patients out with a return-ticket—although, to be sure, she had never heard of the privilege being abused; sullenly or cheerfully, the patients seemed to accept the inevitable when their stipulated time was "up."

She started, as a bell above her head thrilled out like an alarm clock. Immediately an attendant hurried round the corridor-bend, swinging his keys.

"Oh!" he said, seeing her standing there. And, to her surprise, he held open the door and motioned for her to enter. Hesitate, Tilly dared not, although certain

that she was the victim of a misapprehension. She went on, and the door closed silently behind her.

Yes, it was in the nature of a mistake. Both men turned to look at her—for there was another man seated beside the desk, a cigar between his lips, and his fountain-pen poised over an open note-book. In the flood of green-shaded electric light concentrated upon the desk, they looked to Tilly like actors upon a stage—terribly, grandly impressive. Then, with a little inclination of his head—he always bowed to women entering that room, however humbly clad—Doctor Dempsey pointed her to a seat against the wall opposite, touched his bell-push again, and waited.

The same attendant hurried in. What was said, Tilly could not catch. She had half risen, expecting to be ejected; to her wonder, the attendant hurried out, reappeared presently with a big book, and was gone again. The rise and fall of Doctor Dempsey's rich tones took up the thread of talk anew; she sat there like one forgotten, her eyes fascinated, her head hot and her feet cold. After all she had heard, all she had imagined, the anticipation fell short of the reality. It was almost as though she had worked her way into some Holy of Holies.

"I had better say nothing about my own estimate," Doctor Dempsey's voice reached her, as from a great way off. "Here are the official figures, which you may accept as incontrovertible, if upon the moderate side. At this moment—we will put it so—there are 150,000 *known* mental degenerates at large in England and Wales, each of them able to add further to their deathless brigade; and, beyond these, 134,000 certified and confined lunatics."

"Dear me!" said the other man, puffing delicately at his cigar as he wrote and awaited the next item he required.

"Here in London alone," it came, "we have to find accommodation for close upon 28,000 certified lunatics. In consequence of the actual Council asylums being overcrowded, a large number of these have to be 'farmed out' in workhouse infirmaries or stop-gap buildings such as this."

"I have it. And the yearly increase—is that disturbing, or merely keeping pace proportionately with the population?"

"I leave you to judge. While you may remark that the birth-rate exhibits a marked and deliberate decrease—healthy or not, as it will appeal to your readers' point of view; my own view being that the natural process of reproduction needs overhauling, restriction, and adaptation to modern artificial conditions of life—the mental degeneration increases rapidly. As an instance, taking the official figures, nearly five hundred more certified lunatics were admitted last year into London asylums alone than in the previous year. Apply that proportion all over the country, and you arrive at figures which have alarmed the authorities, but which the public does not appear able to appreciate in the least degree."

"But London itself, I take it, compares very favorably in this respect with other great cities of the world?"

Doctor Dempsey smiled, turned over his official pages, and ran his finger to a certain passage.

"I will quote word for word," he said. "'It is an admitted fact that, considering the population of London relatively, there is more drink, crime, and inherited lunacy as a direct consequence of the former, than in any city in the civilized world.'"

He sat back, his finger-tips gently pressed together.

"And you deduce, then, Doctor Dempsey, that the present means of grappling with the matter is wholly inadequate?"

"Wholly." He bowed. "Keeping to the London fig-

ures alone, we find that sixty-six per cent, or two-thirds, of its lunacy is due to heredity. And the tainting process goes on unchecked. That is to say, that slowly but surely the mental cancer is permeating and absorbing the whole of society. You may trace it as you trace the wavering white thread in a block of mushroom spawn. And you can break the block scarcely anywhere without finding the thread."

"And, all these facts being proved, what is your chief difficulty?"

"The difficulty, which will have to be approached very soon, of reconciling a humane and optimistic attitude with the fact that no person, once certified to be a lunatic, permanent or apparently temporary, should ever be allowed to re-enter the outside world again."

A pause; while Tilly unconsciously repeated to herself the one passage that remained in her memory: "The wavering white thread in a block of mushroom spawn."

"Between ourselves, Doctor — ghastly!" mused the other man; then, "Can you give me an actual illustration from memory?"

"Many!" To Tilly it seemed as though the two players on the "stage," with the reserved force of great men, must be approaching some climax. "Many! Insane children—at least, children practically certain to develop insanity—are born simply in shoals every year: each, as I say, with unrestricted power to widen the ripple. . . . Nine years ago, a woman, insane through heredity, was brought to a Council asylum, remained there six months, and was then discharged. In the following five years five children were born to her—and then she was again sent to an asylum, permanently. All those children show symptomatic taint already. . . . A young man was admitted to Bethlehem Hospital. In the following ten years, he was in and out of, for varying periods, eight different asylums. He then married, and shortly after-

wards was placed in yet another asylum, his first child being born while he remained there. Discharged once more, he was yet again incarcerated on two separate occasions, his second and third children being born meanwhile. A while later, we find him again sent to an asylum for a year; and while there, his fourth and fifth children (twins) were born. We trace him, some months later, to still another asylum—and there we had better draw the veil, the official data being at your disposal, if you wish. While this is not, of course, a wholly typical case, it is by no means an unusual one. . . . As another instance, we take the career of a man over a period of twenty-three years—that is, to date. During that time he has been confined as a lunatic in twelve asylums, and in the intervals has become the father of five children. All these cases belong to the sixty-six per cent category of heredity. Thus, as 'like begets like' provedly, what can be anticipated for this progeny, and *their* progeny, but a life of lunacy, or its borderland—degeneracy? . . . It is an amazing thing to consider as we sit here, in cold blood, but perfectly true, that a very large number of poor women, discharged from lunatic asylums, go subsequently to the workhouse infirmary to be delivered of their children. Shortly afterwards, they are returned to the asylum, quite insane. They are once more discharged by the guardians, and the same thing happens again; in fact, the process goes on automatically, without check, without public realization—until it becomes impossible to total or tabulate the number of potentially-insane children thus flung into the world!"

"Exactly! And of the remaining thirty-four per cent——?"

"Of the remainder, some are what you might term incidental—accidental—non-preventable, in short; but of the rest, due solely to worry, poverty, or some similar cause, quite a number could be averted—if, for instance,

common-sense and human sympathy were considered by those set in authority over the distressed and unfortunate."

"As how, Doctor Dempsey——?"

"Well, take a case I have in mind, that came under my notice quite recently." He drew some papers from a pigeonhole, and turned them over in his calm, careful way. "A brutal case, that aroused my indignation, I do confess; I have kept all the newspaper-cuttings for reference. Briefly, a man and his wife, with their six young children, living in a West-country village. The man, a struggler, and earning twelve shillings per week, is turned out of an insanitary cottage, and is unable to find another dwelling of any sort to suit his means. In the end, as he dares not abandon his twelve-shillings-a-week job, a kindly neighbor offers them a substantial garden outhouse as shelter. Down, eventually, comes the local authority. The children are found to be scantily clothed—what wonder?—and the parents are hauled up on a charge of willfully exposing them to risk. Now, mark this! Independent doctors find the children to be perfectly healthy—hardened, in fact, by their condition, as gypsies' children are hardened; and the official medical authority is forced to corroborate. What happens? A Bench of well-filled J. P.'s sentence the man to two months' imprisonment, and the woman to one month. This man was punished for endeavoring to do his human utmost, in circumstances over which he had no control. Result: on leaving jail, broken and penniless, he found his wife gone, and his children sent to various distant workhouses. That man drifted to London, and speedily became a lunatic—crushed by the very power that was designed to protect him. He is here at this moment. . . . Well, now, if you wish to inspect the inner working——"

Just as both men made to rise, a knock sounded upon the door.

"Come in," called Doctor Dempsey.

An attendant entered, handed him a buff envelope, and withdrew.

Talking on as he opened it and scanned its contents, Doctor Dempsey appeared for the moment inclined to regard it as a mere detail of routine — a comparative triviality. Then, with one hand tightening upon his beard, he nodded slowly, and slid the telegram across the table as he rose.

"See that, now! That was an incidental case—a most curious case. I allowed that man out on probation, and finally discharged him. Now, after all these months—back he comes!"

They stepped quickly toward the door together, and it closed behind them. To Tilly, the silence left in the great room was like a spell—a spell in which she sat waiting for something to happen. But nothing happened; and at last, hardly able to bear it, she got to her feet. Presently, as the complete stillness still held, she advanced towards the desk, to wait there. This was a sort of courageous answer to her impulse to escape from the room while the chance held.

Doctor Dempsey's telegram lay there turned toward her. She gazed down at it for some time without seeing anything more than a piece of paper. Then, with a sudden breathless little cry, and hands clasped together, she stooped.

"Kindly send as soon as possible to 4 Wickham Terrace, Islington, for Victor Richards, former patient. Wife, Alice Richards, fears fresh attack."

"Alice!—oh, no, no!" Tilly cried out aloud, as if answering the message. "Oh, no, Alice—*no!*"

Almost she clutched at the telegram, as if to rend a lie to pieces; indeed, that was her wild thought, even before she fully understood — to destroy and thrust it somewhere out of sight, as a dreadful thing that must not

be believed. But the chill of realization came almost simultaneously, and she found herself past the door, groping back along the passage as if suffocating for a breath of purer air.

A buzz and general movement in the long, narrow room helped her in a measure. It was just upon seven o'clock, and the visitors were preparing to leave; Tilly, with an instinctive effort, drooped her scared face, pushed her way on, and gained the paved outer space. Here she burst into a run, fled past the man who had just opened his wooden gate, and staggered Bob Kingdom, waiting ruminatively a few paces beyond it.

"Oh, Bob, Bob!" she said, gazing up, and using his private name as she had done on a former vital occasion. "Come with me — you must! Poor Alice! — broken-hearted Alice!"

CHAPTER XXVI

BOB KINGDOM, who had always a useful reserve fund upon his person, paid for a taxi-cab to Broad Street Station. He would, indeed, have chartered it for the entire distance; but this Tilly Westaway, who had grown more rational under the touch of his arm upon hers, refused to allow. Over and above her sense of fairness, there had supervened a vague dread of the moment when they must reach the house.

"Take anything in, shall I?—anything eatable or such like?" Bob Kingdom ventured to query, as they stepped from Dalston Junction and made for the car bound for Essex Road. Till this point he had listened without speaking, and conceivably without fully comprehending.

"Oh, no," said Tilly. "Don't talk like that! I mean, don't think of eating now—you couldn't!"

It was just eight o'clock, as they went down quiet Wickham Terrace, and looked up to see the crimson-shaded light in the front room.

"You knock," directed Tilly, in a tremble that would not cease. "I'm that numbed, I should clatter it. Just twice—as quiet as you can!"

Bob Kingdom obeyed. "Mean me to come in?" he asked rather dubiously, while there was time.

"If you don't, I can't," replied Tilly.

The woman downstairs answered the summons very promptly, and fell back with stiff resentment as they made to push by her without an audible word.

"I merely thought you might be another doctor," she

observed. "Excuse me, won't you?—I'm not used to wondering whether I'm in my own house or not. People come and go here——"

"Has a doctor been?" breathed Tilly, pausing. "How long ago? Are you—are you quite sure it was a doctor?"

"I'm not sure of anything; I'm not meant to be," responded the person. "There was no carriage, but I *guessed* he was a doctor, by the way he knocked and marched up the stairs. I didn't know one was to be fetched, if that's what you mean. Perhaps you did—excuse me!"

Tilly touched her arm timidly. "Don't be cross with her—with any one," she begged. "I know you wouldn't want to be sorry afterwards."

She went creepingly on up the stairs, Bob Kingdom, cap in hand, and lips wide apart, remaining at the foot. And Alice had heard. She was standing at the top, waiting—a still, quiet figure—a woman who could weep for others, but never for herself.

She put a finger to her lips, and remained just as still and calm while Tilly's arms met around her in a mute, convulsive pressure. Then, beckoning to Bob Kingdom to ascend, she led the way into her sitting-room.

"Sit down," she said. She had not asked, or seemed to wonder, how they came to know. "Take off your things, Tilly, and get anything you like—do anything you wish—just as if it was your own home. Take Mr. Kingdom's cap. I mustn't talk. The knock might come, at any moment—at any moment. And I must be ready."

"Will you—will you go with him?" asked Tilly, chokingly.

"Yes, dear; as far as they will let me. Don't cry; I couldn't bear it. I'd love you so much more if you could act as if nothing had happened, and make Mr. Kingdom some cocoa."

"No cocoa," murmured Bob Kingdom. "All right—

yes—just a cup," he corrected, as Alice put a hand to her forehead and looked at him.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I've borne it before, Mr. Kingdom; perhaps I can bear it again. You won't see me falter; that's all over; and I shall know I have two friends left to me; it won't be all silence. There's nothing to be done—but you'll sit here; you won't go!"

"Just one word, Alice!" said Tilly—as if to show how well she had mastered her feelings. "How is he?"

"Drugged!" replied Alice simply, mechanically. "Haven't I told you?—the doctor is in there with him now—watching him—waiting. Thank God, for the moment, again, he is spared knowing. What has happened till now—in these last two days—I could not tell any one, if they asked me."

"We're not going to ask anything at all," said Tilly, almost stoutly. "We're only here so that you shan't feel you're alone. That's all right! You can see what it is, Mr. Kingdom: she's leaving it all in God's Hands. It's the right way, and the only way; but I'm sure it's wonderful, and a mercy. You or me couldn't do it, I'm afraid."

Bob Kingdom gazed at them in turn, as if he were listening to a dialogue in some foreign language, and could make nothing of it yet. Presently, remarkable as it seemed in the circumstances, he found himself gulping down some hot cocoa; while Tilly—so long as Alice remained in the room, at any rate—made a great show of pouring out and pouring back her own cupful. Behind all was a sense of something nameless taking place in the stillness; but Tilly determinedly held that at bay. "The wavering white thread—" she still unconsciously repeated to herself, as in fascination.

"It's no use," she went so far as to impress upon Bob Kingdom, in one of the frequent intervals when Alice stole out to that other door, to listen. "If it is to be, it

will be. We must face it; and we mustn't allow her to fret; we must do something. I shall have to tell mistress I must have a few days 'off'; and there's an end of it."

"What'll she say?" queried Bob Kingdom, in the same bated tones that they used throughout.

"Goodness knows," said Tilly. "I expect she'll think more than she says. What with one thing and another—well, there, I can't help her troubles; I do my best. After all, if Alice can feel that there's still hope in her life, that's everything. If it was me, now—well, I'm afraid I should feel I must run as far from the house as I could, so as not to see him taken away." She sank her voice still lower. "I wonder what doctor she's got!—I wonder how long it'll be before the asylum men get here. What—what if we could get this doctor to say he's not fit to be moved, and then have him taken to the hospital instead? Why not?"

"Don't seem to be carrying on at all, does he?" reflected Bob Kingdom, solemnly. "Can't hear a sound. Seems a rum turn-out all round, from beginning to end."

"Ah, she knows!" said Tilly, with sad conviction. "She didn't send that telegram till she knew she must; because, don't you see, next time he got better, they wouldn't let her have him home again even on trial. They're blamed for one thing, and blamed for another—you can't wonder!"

Alice came back, and stood looking at them with unseeing eyes. Presently, moving to the mantelshelf, she took up Victor's pipe, and gazed down at it a long while. Her throat worked a little, but it was through Tilly that the real tremor ran. Alice put down the pipe, and turned away again, and went back to the landing outside like one able to act but not to think.

"Seems just as if she's moving about in her sleep," Tilly whispered to Bob Kingdom. "Try and look as if you

don't notice it. I'm so grateful you came with me; you mustn't go—not yet—if you can only manage it, for her sake. Her husband took to you, Mr. Kingdom; she told me so herself; and I shouldn't be surprised if it might keep her from breaking down, you being here like this."

"What about you?" breathed Bob, himself apparently in a haze.

"Goodness knows," said Tilly again. "Look at it—half-past nine!—and I promised faithfully to be in by eight. What ought I to do? She'll sit up, and think there's something happened to me—I know she will."

"What about running round and telling her?" he suggested.

"Yes, I ought to," admitted Tilly. "But she'll think it very strange, as I've never given her any inkling of this; and then, again, they might come for him while I'm gone—I should be nearly an hour explaining. No, I think I'll wait a bit, and hope for the best every way."

"Shall I go round and tell her?" Bob Kingdom queried—as if rather willing than otherwise. And Tilly clutched hastily at his sleeve.

"No—oh, no! You keep where you are. Besides, she'd think it more strange still if *you* knocked there and said I shouldn't be 'in' all night. She'd fetch the master down to know what it meant. I think I'd always rather explain a thing afterwards than beforehand; when the thing's done, you don't feel you've got so much on your mind, and don't look so guilty about it. Upon my word, I hardly know what I am doing, or what's happening anywhere! But so long as I can keep on talking. . . . *Isn't* it all quiet in there? Whatever can the doctor be doing to him?"

"Think he knows he's bad again, and they're coming for him?" Bob Kingdom rumbled, his expression, if not his features, like that of a wondering cherub.

"Goodness knows," whispered Tilly once more. "I've never liked to ask Alice just how he is at such times, be-

cause it seemed—well, you know—sacred, like, between themselves. But if he's in bed, and senseless, it seems a cruel thing to put him in a cab and take him unawares all that way—'sh!"

Alice Richards had stolen back again, and stood with a hand to her breast, listening still—doubtless for an approaching sound of wheels in the quiet street below. Tilly and Bob Kingdom, with breath held, sat looking at each other and yet trying to avoid each other's eyes.

"This is getting dreadful," murmured Tilly, when they two were alone again. "Ten past ten!—I shall begin to think they're not coming to-night after all. When you come to think of it, Doctor Dempsey must have a thousand and one things of the kind to see to; and p'raps they can't always spare the attendants at a moment's notice like that. I believe I did hear, when it's a paying patient or a very dangerous case, they send the asylum ambulance—a cab fitted up like a room inside, with chairs and a couch. . . . I know I've heard one poor soul at the 'Overflow' say how she'd come to dread it with *her* husband, and almost felt as if she would rather see him dead and buried. He's such a nice fellow, too!—I've seen him there several times. You might say it was just such another case as this. He was as fond of her as could be, and cried like a child about it when his mind came fully back to him; and yet he had the one queer thing in a corner of his brain somewhere—asleep and artful, like —and you could never say when it was going to wake up with a start and make him do the same silly thing!"

"Knock her about?" breathed Bob Kingdom, mouth agape.

"Oh, no!—nothing of that. She wouldn't have minded that so much, p'raps; I know *I* shouldn't, because that's soon over and done with. No; the poor thing used to wake up in the night, and find him dressed and bending over her with a look as if she was quite a stranger and had

no right there. 'Up you get,' he'd say. 'You're to come downstairs and play me a game at cards.' And she'd have to dress all in a flurry and shake, and go down, and play at cards with him as long as he felt like it—with her heart in her mouth all the time."

"What for?" queried Bob Kingdom. "Heart in her mouth over cards? What sort o' cards—what game was it? Play her for her money, did he?"

"No, no! It wasn't the mere game itself that did it. But every time, as he shuffled 'em, he used to lean across the table and say: 'If you revoke once, mind—only once—I'll *kill* you!' And he meant it, she said; at any rate, he looked it. How she kept from revoking all the time, she said, she could never tell; for he was watching like a lynx from first to last. And she had to win now and then, to make it seem real, and make him think she was enjoying it. And then, when he'd had enough of it, he'd go back to bed and know nothing about it next morning. But she, poor thing, was done for the night, and had to sit there in a tremble till daylight. No wonder she got thinner and thinner. And yet she couldn't bear the idea of parting with him altogether, and would have him home again on trial each time."

"Bit rough," admitted Bob Kingdom, after staring at the dramatic mental picture of the game as outlined. "Ought to have got what they call a separation, eh?"

"Oh, no," said Tilly, with unconscious emphasis. "You can't separate from anybody if you love 'em. You mightn't ever find that out for yourself; but there it is. It seems that you've got to put up with what you get in this life; and I suppose some of us need trying and punishing more than others—must do, evidently. No; the only thing is, for her to go on playing the cards with him, and hope for the best. We're told that things generally come round all right in the end, and I only hope they do—although I can't quite see how. . . . What *could* be the

reason, I keep wondering, why Alice should have this put upon her—blow after blow, as you might say? What *has* she done, to anybody or anything, to deserve it? Seems altogether beyond thinking about, doesn't it?"

It was quite beyond Bob Kingdom's unraveling faculties, at any rate—especially with his thoughts equally divided between two rooms, as it were. He rubbed his hands and heaved his great shoulders, as if feeling chilly; and Tilly tiptoed to the fireplace.

"I don't even like burning her coals," she whispered, as she gathered up cinders singly and laid them noiselessly on the fire. "If it's meant that he's never to work for her again, even at the best, we don't know how she'll be placed. I can't hope to help her much out of my five-and-nine—or what's left of it—can I?"

"Send home money still, do you?" it occurred to Bob Kingdom to ask her.

"Most certainly I do," answered Tilly, coming back to the edge of her chair, to watch the door again. "I'm only hoping every day mistress 'll say something about a rise, soon. If she don't, I shall have to throw out a hint—although I'm a bad hand at that. I send 'em two-and-six a week now, instead of the two shillings; and when I look at what I've got left for all my work, after buying clothes and so on—well, it takes me all my time to keep cheerful about my own future. Still, it just pays for the room they've got. How they go on for food, I don't know yet—I don't like to ask."

"Must eat something," pondered Bob Kingdom, struck by the problem. "S'pose they wouldn't take a shilling off me, now and again?" he added, after a pause.

"They'd take it," answered Tilly, looking away. "There's no backwardness of that sort. But they're not going to, because I wouldn't let 'em. Any one 'ud think we took you for a rich relation we've just looked up. You save your own money, Mr. Kingdom—you never know."

"Saved a few hundreds so far," he said, gazing as simply as one who spoke of pence. "Bit every week, as a rule. Think that'll be as much as I'll want."

And Tilly, after several silent clearings of her throat, managed to whisper carelessly: "Yes, that's nice! You'll feel able to sleep without waking up and worrying, won't you?"

"Generally sleep all right," Bob told her. "Boiled onion last thing, as a rule. Bed not too soft."

"I know!—it's a beauty. I've slept in—" Tilly checked herself in vague confusion, and paled for once instead of flushing. "I do wish Alice wouldn't stand out there like that," she contrived to run on. "I feel as if I want to do something for her, and yet I can't. Look at it—five to eleven! I believe they've gone to bed downstairs. I heard a—hark!"

She rose, her arms drawn up in suspense. That other door had creaked, opened, and closed again. The doctor had emerged, motioning to Alice to follow him into the sitting-room. Tilly saw a tall, broad and swarthy man who had to stoop as he passed the doorway, and who looked very capable, if something cold and incisive in manner.

"Well, they have not arrived, Mrs. Richards," he said, dragging out his watch. "You see the time? I have done very little, and I am afraid I can do nothing more."

"You must go?" Alice asked, in that same far-away voice.

"Positively. I have completely dropped my other patients to-night on his account. What is to be done? I injected the morphia at nine o'clock, and he seems to be pretty well tired out now—too exhausted to throw it off. I could call in the first thing to-morrow, and I could, as you suggest, see Doctor Dempsey myself about him. But, of course, you understand,"—with sharp movement of head and hand—"all this means expense."

"You—you shall be paid." For a moment Alice stood, as if struggling to grasp her position—fighting back her fear. "Yes, you go, Doctor—and thank you," she whispered faintly at length. "If—if they do not send to take him to-night, I must watch, and let you know somehow in the morning. I think that is all I had to say."

He shrugged significantly, taking up a small black bag.

"Well, I really can't hold out any comfort, Mrs. Richards. You see, I have not studied the case. It does appear to be an unusual one, and I should have liked a word with his own doctor on the subject. There is not the slightest trace of epilepsy, you know. But, there," he added, with a keen side-glance at her own face, "don't worry. I'll call in early, in any case. And—er—let me see: it's late, but if you can send round to my surgery before midnight, I'll put him up as powerful a narcotic as I dare give him in his condition. Yes, you send round! *Good*-night!"

Tilly realized, as Alice stood there like one transfixed, and sprang to follow him down the stairs.

"Doctor!" she dared, as she drew open the front door for him to pass. "Is there—isn't there any other way whatever? *Must* he go?"

"Decidedly," he said; "for his own sake and hers, by the look of it. Are you coming for the draught?"

"I'll be there, sir," she was startled into saying, with a gasp, "in a few minutes."

His footfalls died away firmly, fatefully, down the pavement. For a while, hot and cold by turns—full of wild impulses that yielded to sick misgivings—Tilly hovered there at the foot of the stairs. Mounting them at length, she had an odd sensation of being, as she would have expressed it "out of the picture." Some quiet words had passed between Alice and Bob Kingdom. The latter had risen, cap in hand, but was thrusting the cap back into his pocket; while Alice, one hand upon his arm, her pallid

face both questioning and unutterably trustful, looked up at him.

"That's all right," urged Bob, with a jerk of his head. "Heard what he said—'Don't worry.' That's good enough; you go."

And Alice, still with the dreamlike air, moved across the room and was drawing on her hat and jacket.

"Go where, dear?" Tilly said, hastily. "I've arranged about the medicine—I'm going for it now."

"Mr. Kingdom knows," was the calm reply—almost too calm, as it sounded. "I'm going to obey Mr. Kingdom; I trust him. I am to see you safe home, and call at the surgery on my way, he says."

"Quite right," confirmed Bob, with a fixed side-look at Tilly. "Nothing in that. Mustn't lose your 'place'; and breath o' fresh air do her a world o' good—must have it—gone too long now. No odds to me; all safe enough while I'm here."

"You faithful!" whispered Alice tremblingly, if half unknowingly. The assurance of "safety," whether Bob Kingdom divined it or not, was just then like a cool, soothing hand laid upon a forehead that throbbed with long-pent-up pain. Tilly had nothing left to say.

Bob Kingdom shook her hand passively, and then followed them to the landing.

"Don't want to look in at him again," he muttered. "He's all right with me; done a bit o' nursing before now. Got your door-key?"

Alice held up the key mutely in proof, and they stole down, and the front door clicked behind them. The precise thoughts of the person downstairs, if she heard, were a matter of conjecture—communicated for her husband's ears alone.

For some considerable time Bob Kingdom remained on the landing, running a hand through his hair at intervals, and now and then putting the hand to his ear and stoop-

ing stealthily close to the bedroom door. Then, in his leisurely fashion—with quite his normal air of detachment—he strolled back into the sitting-room, and stood for some further time deep in the profound survey of the bookcase and its contents. He seemed greatly impressed by the fact that one little drab volume bore the title of "Robinson Crusoe"—of the first half of which story he himself had a faint recollection. The numerous other volumes—poetry, science and travel—were to Bob Kingdom's mind significant of an orgy of reading and mental strain which had a good deal to do with the state of affairs at the moment.

"Can't live on books," he reflected aloud. "Better be out in the fresh air. Newspaper enough for any man," —which was more than true of Bob Kingdom, who purchased a thick news-sheet every Sunday and was still picking items of interest from it on the following Saturday.

He heard twelve o'clock strike somewhere, and reckoned up the probabilities ahead. He was intuitive enough to tell himself that, even allowing for her anxiety, Alice Richards was in the condition of mind to prolong her "outing"—if only to show how implicitly she relied upon Bob Kingdom. There would be a brief whispering with Tilly's mistress, a little detour for the surgery, and then a silent searching of her own soul as she turned homeward alone, to face the morrow. And he was right, in a way. Soon, tilting a lath of the blind a little, he made out her slight, black figure in the street below. She was moving slowly up and down the opposite pavement, pausing now and then to gaze up at that window—to gauge the silence—and then moving on again. Bob Kingdom, dropping the lath, felt that this was the best thing that could have happened. There was so seldom any undue tax upon his own physical endurance that it did not occur to him to consider himself.

"Fresh air; world o' good; next best thing, if she mustn't sleep."

He tried a pipeful of Victor Richard's tobacco as an experiment, but soon had had enough. For the next ten minutes he was absorbed in the discovery of a number of large brown eggs, suspended in a row from a stick, and from each of which grew a "forced" little sheaf of brownish-green spears, with signs of blossoms that had opened and faded long since. Bob Kingdom told himself, that, all in all, Tilly's friends were an "out-of-the-way" couple.

"It's all right!" he blurted, as of a sudden he grasped that Alice Richards stood at the head of the stair, like one afraid to advance. He had heard no step—no door closed below. "Needn't have hurried. Everything all right."

"Have you—been in?" she asked. Her face, in that borrowed light, looked almost phosphorescently pale, and seemed too small and fragile a setting for such great dark eyes.

"Me?" He shook his head. "Thought I'd let well alone. Listened now and then; kept myself ready."

"Faithful!" she whispered once again, as to herself.

She put up her finger beckoningly, and then very softly, very gradually, turned the handle of the bedroom door. Bob Kingdom looked in over her shoulder. There was very little to see—and nothing disturbing, that Bob could make out. Asleep or drug-deadened, Victor Richards lay there quite still, his head huddled forward and half-hidden by the coverlet.

"My husband!" Bob Kingdom heard, quiveringly, from her lips. Then she had closed the door again, and put out her hands to him, and was actually trying to smile.

"I was to say from Tilly—'God bless you!' . . . And now, you are going to have something to eat and drink. With me—yes; we both need it. And then—I have been trying to think. There is an early-morning car to the City

at half-past two—or there might be a train. Could you get home in that way?"

Bob Kingdom appeared to consider it, as a sort of last resource. "I might," he said, rather doubtfully. "Haven't troubled to think. What about you?"

This plain question Alice did not seem able to answer. She turned away and prepared fresh cocoa and cut thin slices of bread and butter with such steady fingers that Bob Kingdom wondered. In her eyes, as she moved to and fro, the listening look alternated with a gratitude that the night was passing—slowly passing! But she did not, as she had suggested, sit down at the table with him. She seemed to feel that that might embarrass him. She ate just a crumb or two to keep him company, as she stole to the door and back again.

"Tilly get 'in' all right?" he queried. And she nodded. "Not a bad sort, Tilly," he added, abstractedly. "Keeps up well, considering."

Alice went to the mantelshelf, reached down a letter, and laid it silently before him, and pointed. Beneath the words "Your ever true friend, Tilly," Tilly had copied her loved lines, as a sort of rock of refuge:

> "'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever;
> Do noble deeds, not dream them all day long!'"

Bob Kingdom sat and studied this torpidly for a long time; and roused at length with quite an effort, to see that the time was nearing two o'clock.

"Er—yes," he said, answering what he thought was a look in her eyes. "You go in to him; don't you mind about me at all; any tram or train does me. You go on in!"

She pressed his shoulder, and tiptoed away. And from this point Bob Kingdom's subsequent impressions as to what happened were somewhat obscured. He had turned

down the light a little, as it struck him there was an unnecessary waste on his account. He had another look at Tilly's quotation, nodded frequently to himself, and replaced the letter. Then, feeling just a trifle drowsy, he went to the book-case, and drew out the old, drab little volume—"Robinson Crusoe." After this lapse of years, he had a mild hankering to know how the thing had ended up. He found it puzzling, however, to pick up the thread again; so turned back to the beginning. There were in this particular book old-fashioned plates that resembled photographs, and he marveled how any one had been on the spot to "take" them. At any rate, he gave no more thought to tram or train, but seemed to feel a fixture there—till daylight, at all events. And so the time wore away till half-past four.

About that hour he started from a doze, and half got to his feet. Victor Richards was awake, then. He could hear Alice talking, in a cooing, fondling voice, that went on for some time. He dropped back, as it ceased, and dozed off again, dreaming of savages, Spaniards, cut-throats, etc. . . . And then, suddenly—in the same minute it seemed to him, although actually an hour later—he rose again, and rubbed his eyes, as mingled noises came from that other room, growing and growing until the quiet night seemed full of sound. . . . A man's voice, husky, inchoate, strenuous—and a woman's thrilling higher and higher above it.

"Victor—precious! Oh, my loved one—no, no! It's your wife—Alice! Give it to me—to me! Victor, don't—don't! Oh, God help me!"

There was a stumbling, a moaning, a dull trampling of feet; and then that door was open with a burst. . . .

"Hullo!" gasped Bob Kingdom, on the other side of it, quietly, as he felt himself struck violently on the breast, and put up a hand to realize that he could have withstood it. His fingers closed upon something cold—some-

thing that, buried deep in him, quivered still with the force of the impact. Not a knife—no; but a long, slender pair of scissors that tapered to a point like a dagger's.

Drawn back, with the shine of horror and set purpose still in his eyes—his shaking arm still raised—Victor Richards gazed at him; gazed at him—as if seeing only that it was *a man*. Then all the tense muscles seemed to relax at once. With just a faint little sound—like that of one yielding up his last breath—Victor dropped and lay quite still, with arms outstretched and fixed eyes still widely staring.

. . . . . .

At seven o'clock, the tall, swarthy doctor stooped over the bed, and lifted his patient's eyelids again and again, and muttered little "H'mphs!" as he took the temperature and counted the pulse-beats.

"I shall want to call in some one else; I won't be responsible," he said, abruptly. "Look here, I think you had better 'phone Doctor Dempsey in my name. Tell him what has happened. The case was in his hands. He may prefer to deal with it directly himself, as matters stand."

At ten o'clock, a taxi-cab glided down Wickham Terrace. Doctor Dempsey stepped out, motioning the attendant with him to wait. Hand gripping his beard, deeply attentive, he stood in the sitting-room above, while Bob Kingdom jerked out a few staccato explanations, and pointed to a huge pocket-book lying upon the table. Doctor Dempsey picked it up, looked at the clean cut that had penetrated one leather flap and a stack of enclosures, fitted it back into Bob Kingdom's breast-pocket, gauged the narrowness of the margin—and showed what he felt by refraining from any comment.

"I didn't gather that the attack was imminent," he said. "How came he by anything so dangerous as this?"—taking up the scissors.

"In the mattress itself, she thinks," Bob told him.

"Seems it must have lain there—been put there just beforehand—if there's any telling."

"Just so!" said Doctor Dempsey. "Get yourself a pick-me-up; you look queer."

He walked through into the other room, bowed to the still woman at the foot of the bed, nodded to the other professional man, and stooped over the bed. One look, one touch upon the burning forehead, one lifting of the closed eyelids, and he straightened up.

"I couldn't think of ordering his removal; out of the question. You know?"

"I thought as much," replied the other doctor. "I was with him at eleven o'clock last night. I never saw anything more rapid."

"Nevertheless," whispered Doctor Dempsey, "he is in for brain-fever. Now, I wonder!—I wonder!" He stood, his face a study, his great intellect at work flicking over the pages of all his accumulated experiences. Then at last he looked up sideways. "Mrs. Richards! I wouldn't give way; I wouldn't say but that the worst has happened for the best, in this case. Climax—and anti-climax! You see? His trouble has come to a head. If you can pull him through this, there is, in my opinion, a very considerable hope indeed that you have seen the last of it!"

CHAPTER XXVII

WELL, Mr. 'Mug,' or whatever you call yourself, your fourteen days don't seem to have done you much good. Can't see you buyin' anythin' back out o' sentiment, not at any price. Wasn't to be supposed, not for a minute!"

Mr. Kingdom, senior, comfortably wedged in the doorway of his office, contemplated the fading twilight outside, and rubbed his hands together with a nice sense of his own business aptitude.

He had adhered to his agreement, rubbishy as it seemed on the surface and in essence. Thirteen of the stipulated days had gone, and the bargain-stock lay heaped intact in the locked cabinet behind him. Mentally, of course, he had already apportioned a price to each "lot," and disposed of the bulk in various ways, being in a position to offer a genuine bargain himself, and yet retire from the deal with a princely profit. Once or twice, indeed, he had turned over an idea of burying his already practically "dead" business, retiring to a snug little place in the outer surburbs, and working off his redundant flesh by the aid of a hobby—such as gardening. This proposition, however, was not likely to materialize. It was merely a pleasantly colored bubble which had been blown at intervals for so many years that little Mrs. Kingdom's sad eyes had ceased to glisten at the sight of it. Mr. Kingdom had amassed considerable "weight," socially speaking, in his present environment —notably in private-bar parliaments; and he was not positive that the surburbs recognized a "real" man when

they saw one. Moreover, the culture of fruit-trees and vegetables, alluring enough as a contrast, really appealed to Mr. Kingdom much as playing with sand on the sea-shore might have done. Fruit and vegetables, he held, were in the main food for cattle; man requiring a good beefsteak, washed down by a pint of bitter ale.

"My word, blowy, ain't it?" observed the provision-man next door, as he dipped discreetly behind the wind-screen to wipe his nose, and caught sight of his neighbor emerging for a look at the sky. "Time o' year, I suppose. We shall get something bearable soon, I hope. What's it they say?—'March winds and April showers bring forth May flowers'? Never mind about flowers: I wish they'd bring forth a few customers along here."

"Don't talk silly," said Mr. Kingdom, intending to be indulgent. "You're wishin' for the Millennium. Won't be in your time, my dear feller. If you was to bribe the Council to shove up a few more lights jest here, now, and show people there *is* a bacon shop behind you, —well, you'd be doin' somethin' sensible. You might even sell them eggs, with luck."

The bacon man did his best to titter.

"What a poor idea you must have of your fellow-men, that you can't find a good word for anybody, Mr. K.! I'd sooner be as I am, and just make ends meet, that I would."

"Meet, do they?" echoed Mr. Kingdom, as in surprise. "Oh, I see—you mean—on paper. Got to *look* prosperous to get on in bis'ness, haven't you? Well, I don't mind givin' you a useful 'tip': paint your eggs red and yeller. As your bacon's already goin' green, you can call yourself a bloomin' rainbow, and get yourself talked about."

The other, like one who had not been listening, retired into his premises. With a little chuckle, Mr. Kingdom rubbed his hands once more, and decided that it was

dark enough to close the shop and shout "Out!" Another moment, and it would have been done; but, just as he turned, two men—one a police-inspector—stepped briskly up.

"Er—Mr. J. Kingdom, I want," announced the inspector, courteously enough.

"That's me," confirmed Mr. Kingdom, his eyes taking an added bulge. "That's me, I believe." And they stepped straight in.

"Warrant to look over your establishment," explained the official, whipping out and handing him a blue paper. "If you don't mind——!"

"Don't mind?" repeated Mr. Kingdom, rather sinkingly. "Hold hard, mister!—search my establishment? What for?"

"Read the order, and you'll see," was the reply. "I daresay you've got a very good idea already, come to that. It's only a formality; but you received your 'notice' from the police over a week ago. A paper!—a 'stolen property' description notice!"

"Me?" muttered Mr. Kingdom, looking as if his blood was turning to water. "Not me, officer; I've never had no paper o' the sort. Not me; you've made a bad mistake this time."

The inspector waved his arm as if used to such protests as a matter of course.

"Well, my dear sir, it was served upon you—served upon every jeweler, silversmith and pawnbroker in the six-mile radius; that's all I know. Let's have a light, if you don't mind; I've half a dozen other search warrants to get through to-night."

"But why—why—why fix on my place?" feebly asked Mr. Kingdom, as he struck a match and turned on a very low gas-light. "What's it mean? If any paper's come, it must ha' been pushed through the letter-box,

and I shouldn't notice it, or it might ha' got torn up. You don't say there's any—any——"

"Bought and sold anything just lately, Mr. J. Kingdom?" asked the inspector carelessly, as he turned the gas full on and motioned to the plain-clothes man to close and fasten the shop door. "You seem unnecessarily flustered, I mean. Do much business here? You're a registered dealer in metals and stones, I see. Wholesale or retail?—what's your stock like?"

He ran his eye alertly over the dusty display in the window, and then around the walls,—sniffing the atmosphere for something, as it were.

"I dunno—I dunno what you're thinkin' of," faltered Mr. Kingdom, mopping his forehead as he looked from one to the other. "You might drop your voice a little, if that's anythin'; I'm pretty well known about here. What—what 'stolen' stuff are you referrin' to? It's all news to me."

"News to everyone, till they've looked in their morning paper," remarked the inspector, moving about and pulling over the old-fashioned furniture with his gloved hand. "I suppose you *do* read one, Mr. Kingdom, even if you don't trouble to open an official notice—or you've read all about it outside the police-station, eh? That's the gang's latest little haul, Mr. Kingdom—about five hundred pounds' worth from the Cable Street warehouse. Smart lot, those chaps!"

"Have you got 'em—the gang—the chaps?" ventured Mr. Kingdom, in a voice he scarcely knew to be his own. He felt unable to think, much less stir.

"Not yet," said the officer, cheerfully. "The reward may 'draw' one of them. Still, we've traced quite half the stuff, sir; and we're in good hopes of tracing the other half. If it's not stowed away somewhere in your district, Mr. Kingdom, it's nowhere at all. We've narrowed it down that far—at least, I have. I'm hoping

to take some credit, I assure you. . . . You've got nothing much here—nothing but a lot of old rubbish—that's evident."

"You'll find that's about all I've got left in the place," strained Mr. Kingdom, with just a faint ray of hope. "I'm no pawnbroker; I let my license slide years ago; you might say I'm out o' bis'ness altogether now."

"Ah!" said the inspector, to himself. "That's all right, Mr. K.! Show us round this other room, will you?"

Forced to move, Mr. Kingdom put a shaky match up to the gas-jet in his office. Without knowing it, he had already resigned himself to a blow; his limbs seemed numbed, and the first warm sweat had gone cold on his body.

"Move yourself, constable!" said the inspector sharply to the other man. "No need to hold the door; Mr. Kingdom has nothing to keep back."

Together they shifted the lumber, opened drawers, and ransacked corners. Practically the last thing the inspector came to, was the big cabinet. He gave a sharp rap against the panels, seemed about to turn away dissatisfied—then rapped it again, heavily, and, with his ear against the lock, looked at Mr. Kingdom. The latter gentleman was fish-belly white as to complexion.

"Key!" said the inspector, calmly. He flung open the double door, looked, just said "H'm!", glanced at a paper from his pocket, and turned the key again. "I'll leave you in charge," he said to the plain-clothes man. "Mind stepping round to the station with me, Mr. Kingdom?"

"What for?" burst from Mr. Kingdom, in a sort of sob. He put out his hands. "You don't—you don't mean to say——?"

"No; you've said all there is to be said," was the

ironic reply. "You knew better than to save us the trouble, didn't you? I thought I wasn't far 'out.' If you don't mind——! No need of a scene, until the Court hearing comes on, unless you wish it. Have a cab, if you like to pay for it; and get your bail afterwards."

"My Gawd!" rattled Mr. Kingdom. It had come back to him fully now—Murgatroyd's callously casual reference to a "thieves' receiver,"—so much dust thrown in his eyes! "But you're jokin', officer—my Gawd, you're jokin'! What d'you want me to do? Make a clean breast of it? Can't I?—ain't that good enough between man and man? Why, it's my ruin. D'you reckon, if I'd had any idea whatever what was 'on,' I'd ha' took the stuff off their hands like that? Believe me, I no more give a thought to any such thing than—than if a man came in at that door and offered me a fourpenny cabbidge for a ha'penny. What d'you want me to own up to?"

"Nothing," said the officer, who had scribbled in a notebook. "I wouldn't say another word, if I were you; you'll have quite enough to do to make your case good to the Court." He pointed. "Here's the stolen stuff —on your premises—locked away; do you disavow it? You don't suppose we thought it had come there without hands?"

"Listen!" implored Mr. Kingdom. "Gimme a bare chance—jest a moment—I dunno fairly what I'm doin' or sayin'. If I can prove to you that I hadn't heard o' the burglary—that I never read your notice about it——"

"You can't," the other rapped in. "You can't do that. Ignorance of that sort is no plea—you know that as well as I do. What did you buy it at?—dirt price, of course?"

"No!" averred Mr. Kingdom, his arms going up strain-

ingly. "No; believe me, no! Forty-five pounds they asked, and forty-five I gave 'em—forty-five o' the best, cash down! And there's the very two bags they brought it in as from 'home,' if you can't take my word. I never—never dreamed what was behind it; although I might have had my thoughts afterwards. There's the stuff, as you say; but it don't prove more than my being sucked in absolutely wicked by a couple o' sharpers. I don't want it—I don't claim any stolen stuff—not me! Take it with you as it stands, and give it back to the police, or the parties, whoever they are; but don't drag me into the Court case—don't! Look what it means at my time o' life! I can't say fairer!"

"What's the use of that?" asked the inspector, shortly. "The property itself is not our affair; we want to get hold of the gang at the game. I say nothing against your record; but you've undoubtedly allowed yourself to be made a thieves' receiver, haven't you? You knew that the stuff was not *bona fide,* or you wouldn't have offered about a third of its value. That's the nature of the charge against you. Where's the list?"

He fished it from his pocket again, glanced down it, and threw open the cabinet doors.

"Is the lot here? Parted with anything yet?"

"Nothing! I ain't laid a finger on 'em since they was put there—not a finger!"

"*That* won't go down in your favor," was the acid comment. "That's as good as to say you knew."

"No; hold hard—wait a bit!" begged Mr. Kingdom desperately, striking the table to gain time. "Think what you're sayin' of before you move, Inspector! I signed that feller an agreement that I wouldn't get rid of it for fourteen days—an option, friendly like, for him to buy it back in that time, if he liked. You can see for yourself whether I'm the sort o' man to——"

"You did?" sniffed the inspector, as he scanned the

pilfered stock. "Smart move on their part, I will say, if that's the case. That's the game, was it?—to keep your mouth shut tight and the 'deal' from being traced home to any one? Where's this agreement?—the magistrate will want to see it."

"I ain't got it," said Mr. Kingdom, aghast. "He took it with him."

"That's bad," was the dry comment. "I'm afraid it won't do, Mr. Kingdom; you'd better keep your own counsel for the moment; you've let yourself in for a very serious charge. Here, check them off, to make sure, before they leave the premises!" he added to his assistant.

Mr. Kingdom stood scarcely breathing, suppressing wave upon wave of sickness, as the items were called from the list, and the various articles, transferred from the cabinet to the table, were ticked off. They formed a terrifying array—a damning indictment in themselves.

"That the lot?"

"That's the lot—no, there's a ring mentioned here: a three-stone ring!"

The inspector searched again, and then thought to look at Mr. Kingdom's finger.

"There it is," he said grimly, pointing. And Mr. Kingdom came to himself with a shiver.

"Eh? Yes, this is it—I jest slipped it on at the time, and left it. Here you are, officer, put it in with the rest; I don't want no burgled affairs on me—I ain't that type o' man!"

"All complete, then? And these are the identical bags they brought it in, you say? Hand them up! H'm, ha, quite new—from the same warehouse—the stuff clapped straight into them, then and there. . . . Put it all back in the bags, then, just as it was. Fancy we shan't be so long before we come up with the gang, after all. . . . Now, then, Mr. Kingdom, ready. We'll

call a cab and take this little load straight to the station, and you can identify them there, and make out the best case for yourself you can. You've told me nothing, mind; I've done all I came to do."

"Look here!" Mr. Kingdom made his great effort: advanced as far as the inner door, and stood with his back against it. "You see what it is; it's no use your talkin' like this, officer—I couldn't do it. I'd as lief shoot myself, as come up to Court and see my name in the papers, guilty or not guilty. Be a man—be a chum—jest for the minnit! What's the damage?"

"Damage? Might be a year—or two years—on conviction; don't you know that? On the other hand—if you can help us to get hold of the men, and they own up—you might get a part of your forty-five-pound loss made good; all depends on the magistrate's order, of course. But in any case——"

"Stop it!" gasped Mr. Kingdom, feeling at his throat. "That ain't what I mean. Ain't there any hope o' keepin' my name out of it?—that's my question to you gents. Can't it be done, or tried? You've got the stuff back, and you've got little ways o' your own. I'm open—and willin'—to do my part. Here!" He fumbled feverishly in a pocket-book, and produced two dirty five-pound notes, hardly looking at them. "There! It's on the table. It's yours; and it's money! Clear out, and do the best you can for a man . . . in trouble . . . with a wife and a bis'ness reputation fifty years old!"

"Amounts to bribery," was the officer's curt remark, with a shrug. "You'd better not——"

"It ain't," begged Mr. Kingdom. "Nothin' o' the sort. It's for your trouble. Here!—here's another—the last I've got on me; I'll make it fifteen. Split it up between you—do what you like—on'y gimme your word you'll do your best without injurin' your own job in any

way. Any wrong in that? None! Man to man—put yourself in my place—how'd you feel?"

And presently the sweat poured down his face afresh—of relief, this time. The inspector, after pushing away the notes, and standing firm, was human enough to pick them up and look at them.

"Well," he said, at length, "if you like to put it in that way—for my trouble—and keep it at that, I'll do my best as a pure favor. If I can't—I can't. You'll know by the morning, anyway; and you'll have to come up to the station if you're sent for; and you'll know it's out of my hands. Is that understood?"

"Down to the ground!" said Mr. Kingdom, with unmeasured depth. "But you don't think for a moment I'm likely to be charged—not now?"

The inspector thought hard, as he picked up one bag.

"I don't say it isn't done every day," he owned; "but it's risky. At any rate, I'll say that you needn't come with us now; I'll frame my report to the effect that I raided suspected empty premises, and found the stuff left there, just as it was stolen. I'd better destroy that search-warrant at once, then—or keep it out of the way, at any rate."

"You're a good sort," rattled Mr. Kingdom, as the warrant, after some hesitation, was torn into strips. "You're a genius. And don't forget to look in when you're passin' this way again—after a few months."

"That's all right," was the reply, none too reassuring. "Don't get talking, anyway; I don't want to find a charge against myself. You'll know one way or the other in the morning, as I say. Of course, I've got no power to keep it out of the newspapers—we shall have to insert in them a full list of the recovered property to-morrow, and you'll have to chance what happens. If we trap any of the gang—as we may at any moment—and they 'give you away' in the dock—well, there you are!"

"Then, for Gawd's sake, don't touch 'em—let 'em go!" was Mr. Kingdom's final drastic appeal. "Let yourselves out, gents—I'm done!"

He was. As the outer door clicked he dropped into the nearest chair, gazing glassily at his empty cabinet, and too limp to act upon his own impulses, although it seemed that at any minute the late evening-paper purveyors might be shouting news of the latest local sensation.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WELL before full daylight next morning, scantily dressed and hollow-eyed, Mr. Kingdom felt his way downstairs and slid back the bolts of the shop door. Opening it an inch or so, he peered out, more than half prepared to find the view blocked by a constable placed there on guard. There was none; but the mere sight of one striding off duty down the opposite pavement made him put a hand over his heart, and groan.

For a time he stood, clutching a halfpenny, watching pieces of paper whirled by in the March wind, and listening to the metallic rumble of milk-chariots in side-streets. A passing Post-Office mail van had the look of a Black Maria, and he shuddered. As a rule, there seemed a whole battalion of news-vendors hovering in the road; but this morning not one was in sight. At last, however, he made out his own crippled news-agent approaching, and closed the door sharply, and stood in a sort of fascination, watching the sinister morning paper as it was worked through the letter-slit.

It fell. When, with palsied fingers, he found the courage to pick it up, he looked for his name in large letters on the front page, over a detailed list of the stolen property. . . . It was not there. Breathing heavily, he turned from page to page; but still could see nothing. . . . Full daylight found him sitting in his office with drooped jaws and protruding eyes. He had run his large forefinger down every printed column at least three times; he had stared through the advertisements

until they danced and blurred blackly; and there was not a single incriminating paragraph—not a line—not a word. No reference to the Cable Street burglary, the police *coup,* or the recovered goods, whatever. . . . Mr. Kingdom crawled back into bed, muttered something about feeling a bit bilious, and lay there torpid until nearly noon.

The remainder of that day resembled a dream. The suspense seemed to have curdled his blood; he was incapable of any effort beyond a feeble roll to the shop door as each successive edition of the various "evening" papers was shouted. Never in his life had Mr. Kingdom absorbed so much light literature, at the same dizzy speed; and on each separate occasion he dropped back in his chair with the sensations of a condemned man reprieved for about ten minutes. At 9 p. m. he had a stack of newspapers at his elbow; and not one of them had been vouchsafed an inkling of the facts—not a word had been allowed to leak out.

Mr. Kingdom had his mental limitations, but not to the degree that he could cheat himself with appearances. He recognized that the very fact of the silence was ominous. It could only mean that the police, having him safe enough under observation, were preparing their case and withholding particulars for their own purposes; and to urge that he had bribed an officer would merely blacken his own position. He ate nothing, and groaned so involuntarily and so continuously, that little Mrs. Kingdom, listening from the stairs, feared to ask him the exact nature of his sensations, or just where they lay.

The second day was practically a repetition of the first—if anything, worse; for Mr. Kingdom was feeling the added effects of going without his usual nightly stimulants. On the third day, however, a vast, vague, but excusable wonder began to ferment beneath his load

of dread. Dangerous as it seemed, at midday he could bear himself no longer, but clapped on his square bowler hat and made a plunge for the open street. For a while he walked as uncertainly as a man who had been ill in bed for weeks, but this wore off, and he drew up just in time to realize that instinctively he had got to within two hundred yards of the local police-station.

For whole hours, as it seemed, he glared wistfully, fearfully, at this building, on just the bare chance that he might catch a glimpse of the inspector, and obtain a covert warning nod that might relax the strain a little. But, numerous as were the stalwart figures that passed in and out, the inspector was not among them. On impulse, finally, Mr. Kingdom clutched the ear of a passing boy, and nearly frightened him out of his wits by the expression he turned upon him.

"Want a penny?—want tuppence? You see all them papers plastered up there outside the p'lice-station. Go'n' read 'em, and tell me jest what's on 'em. Tuppence, if you do it quick. I can't read, myself!"

Twopence or no twopence, the boy did not dare disobey. He ran, and was to be seen darting from printed notice to printed notice. Finally he returned, with such an inextricable, addled, and faithful account of strayed animals, wife-deserters, "Recruits wanted—God save the King!", foundlings, a drowned man with marks on a red shirt and a tattooed arm, and a warning not to expectorate in public, that Mr. Kingdom turned, spat publicly himself to relieve his feelings, and moved off, forgetting all about the promised fee.

"Barmy!" the boy sent after him, when he had recovered and deemed it safe. "Barmy bilker!"

"My Gawd, I am, too," muttered Mr. Kingdom to himself. "He's about hit it. If somethin' don't happen soon, I don't answer for myself."

The fourth day dragged by, and the fifth arrived.

"If you feel so peculiar—and you look it—you'd better summon up and see a doctor," ventured little Mrs. Kingdom. "If you won't tell me, tell him. If there's anything wrong, it's best to know it."

"Doctor be ——!" said Mr. Kingdom, frighteningly. "Don't talk to me; I'm too bad for that. Leave me alone; that's all *you've* got to do."

He went out again. It was fortunate (or otherwise) that he happened to pass the office of a solicitor with whom he had a local nodding acquaintance—with whom, indeed, he had had small business transactions in the past. It seemed an omen, at all events. He took off his hat, wiped his forehead—and then in he went.

"Why, Mr. Kingdom! Quite a stranger!" said the solicitor. "Sit down! You're not looking quite yourself. Can I do anything useful for you?"

"Can you do it at half-price, as we're neighbors in bis'ness—that's the thing?" sepulchrally replied Mr. Kingdom, not too far gone to lose sight of the expensiveness of his step.

"Half-price? Let's see, now!" The solicitor bit his pen thoughtfully. "Do I get my meat and groceries at that scale off the shopkeepers round about here? I don't fancy I do. No, I'm sure of it. They don't seem to look at it in that way."

"Oh, all right, then, go ahead!" muttered his client, using his hat as a fan. "It's like this: I can't—bear myself—any bloomin' longer. Understand that? If you can't do anythin', say so right out at once; for I tell you straight, I feel more like twopenn'orth o' carbolic, and chance what happens."

"Sounds bad," murmured the solicitor. "Perhaps you've taken yourself in time by coming to me—eh?"

"No," said Mr. Kingdom, head drooped dejectedly on his breast. "No; I know better than that. I've been

bled nearly to death, and I'm here to be bled a bit more. Get on with it!"

"Well, yes, get on!" encouraged the other, with a gentle cough. "Let's see, I drew up your will some long time ago, didn't I?"

"Don't talk about wills, mister, please! I ain't buried yet, but I soon shall be, if you can't tell me jest how I stand—where I stand—why I stand like it—and what I'm goin' to do to keep my senses together. Well, to cut it short, and havin' more brains than I've got—what d'you make o' this?"

And out it poured—occupying, by the solicitor's clock, fully twenty minutes, Mr. Kingdom's voice at times booming hoarsely through the room, and anon sinking to a mere thrilling whisper. "Now, then," he finished, impressively. "You're a lawyer—or you call yourself one; jest what d'you advise me to do? What d'you reckon my position is at this minnit? On the face of it, am I open to any criminal charge?—and if not, what steps can I take to clear myself and feel I can breathe like any other man?"

For some time it appeared as if the solicitor was taking money for nothing—he stared so opaquely into space. Then at length he snapped his thumb and finger, turned his head to cough, and leaned judicially forward.

"Your position at this moment, Mr. Kingdom, I take to be a very unpleasant one. We'll examine it. You can't very well set out to make inquiries, because it will be tantamount to opening the charge against yourself, and because you wished (ahem!) for your part in the affair to be hushed up. Apparently they've 'contrived' it—kept your name out of it——"

"But how have they kept it all out o' the papers, too?" demanded Mr. Kingdom, making the table quiver with his thump. "That's the myst'ry I can't get over. It's got to come out in print, sooner or later; and it's like

a bloomin' sword hangin' over my head. I'm apparently sixty quid out o' pocket so far over it—and yet I dunno one minnit from another but what a p'liceman with a warrant 'll come down on my body. It's like slow poison; and I'd sooner have it quick, if I must, and done with it."

"Quite so; I'm with you there," said the solicitor, promptly. "But you see I haven't got the poison here—the police hold that. You've given me the facts; now leave me to deal with them. It's delicate; the ground wants feeling very carefully. I'm down at the Police-court two or three times a week—at least, I can make it my business to be there. I'll find out; I'll find out *something,* at all events. Drop in and see me again in three days. Er—six-and-eightpence, please, Mr. Kingdom—if you're going to pay as you go. I remember you object to running up bills."

"What!" said Mr. Kingdom, as if overwhelmed by the figure. "Six-and-eight jest for a friendly look in, with nothin' done? Why, it's wicked—it's like eatin' money!"

"Still, it's the equitable fee, Mr. Kingdom," said the other, affably. "I'm no match for you at driving a bargain, so I shouldn't try. You leave the rest to me!"

With a hollow groan Mr. Kingdom threw down seven shillings, took his hat and his fourpence change, and turned his face for home again.

The solicitor was looking very bright, and yet very mysterious, as, on the appointed day, Mr. Kingdom reappeared. It was noticeable that the latter's puffy cheeks had deflated considerably, and that, although he still carried his frontal bulk at an aggressive poise, he did so mainly by force of habit. He dropped into the client's arm-chair like a man past caring for anything, and looked across with a fixed, glassy eye.

"Out with it!" he said, at once. "I'm livin' on brandy; and if I ain't talked in my sleep, and told everythin', it's a miracle. That's all you've done for me so far, mister."

The solicitor smoothed his nice white hands softly over each other, closed the door, and eased his troublesome cough.

"Well, I'm rather afraid what I have to tell you won't exactly roll a weight off your mind," he observed; "but, of course, I may be wrong. First of all, however, I think it best to ask you if you are prepared to pay my bill. There it is."

He slid a paper across. Mr. Kingdom gazed very hard at a number of items set forth, and then at the total at the foot—nine pounds, nineteen and fourpence.

"W—what's this?" he got out, with difficulty, at length. "What might this be? You want nine-nineteen-four off me jest for writin' a letter or so, payin' a few calls, and takin' a taxi or two? Are you in the swim with all the rest, mister? . . . I shan't pay it. I repudiate the bleed'n' thing. It's robbery, downright, this is!"

The other shrugged.

"Very well, then, Mr. Kingdom; I'll say 'good-day,' and send in the bill by registered post to-night. You can dispute it in an action, if you choose; but you'll find I'm on the safe side. Have another look at the items."

Mr. Kingdom did not move. Undoubtedly he looked one to be pitied, at that moment. With odd throat noises, after a time, he roused himself sufficiently to wedge a hand into his trousers' pocket, and drew out six sovereigns slowly, with a sob of his breath between each coin.

"There you are," he quavered. "You'll have it, I know, if it's the last penny I've got to my name. Take it, and send in your bill for the rest; you've done me. Go on!—let's hear what you've got to tell me."

"Have a cigar," said the lawyer, soothingly, as he swept the coins into a drawer. "Do!" he urged, as if he thought Mr. Kingdom might need it.

"Not me," said the latter, heavily. "I don't smoke 'em; and I wouldn't rob you, if I did. You can put me out o' my misery, if you don't mind."

"Well, then," said the lawyer, "I will. And I'll put it very plainly. Your real idea, now, in coming to me, was this: You thought the police had kept it so quiet that they must be doing a bit of underhand business themselves, and that therefore you had a sort of hold on them—in other words, that you might be able to get back part of your money. Eh?"

"I did," confessed Mr. Kingdom, forcibly. "I don't mind sayin' that, if I thought there *was* no charge to be brought against me, I'd go and demand the bloomin' lot back off 'em—and my fifteen pun' as well. And I dunno as I shan't. It's like this: I was took off my heels. If I'd ha' bully-blustered it out on the spot, I might ha' made 'em prove somethin' definite before I let 'em seize the stuff, that I'd paid for in solid coin, cash down. I don't mind sayin' it's my growin' belief they've stuck to the goods and 'had' me for a mug!"

The solicitor bowed. "They have," he said. "They have; and no mistake about it. You'll never see a farthing of your money back in this world, Mr. K.,—I'll say nothing about the next."

Mr. Kingdom gazed for a moment, then unbuttoned his waistcoat, and rose, as with culminating purpose.

"Right!" he was understood to say. "That's enough; that's done it. I'll expose 'em; I'll sue 'em for moral damage and criminal conspiracy against the public. I knew it!—I knew there was some hole-and-corner game goin' on. I've heard, over and over again, that the p'lice are a bloomin' sight deeper in the blackmailin' bis'ness than the thieves themselves. I'll——"

"There's only one drawback," said the lawyer thoughtfully, as his client paused in the stress of emotion. "The police know nothing whatever about it."

"Eh?" gasped Mr. Kingdom. "What?"

"Nothing whatever about it," repeated the other. "You must take my word for it all, because I was paid to find out"—as Mr. Kingdom dropped back with a thud and glared at him almost unnaturally. "In the first place, there was no Cable-Street burglary. There may have been others—but that we need not concern ourselves about. In the second place, the police never sent to have your premises searched that night—or any other night. They don't know you."

"What?" repeated Mr. Kingdom, feeling at his heart, upon which the wall of inward fat seemed about to close.

"There is no 'Mr. Murgatroyd'; consequently, there was no dead father, and no house of furniture to be sold at a sacrifice. But there *is* a gang of expert thieves working an up-to-date system in these parts," pursued the other; "and the two men you met in the public-house that night were a pair told off to draw you into the net. You must admit they did it thoroughly; and that they got better value off you in the end than they could get from any professional 'receiver.' A hundred per cent better, I should imagine."

He paused. But Mr. Kingdom had nothing to say—or no power to say it.

"And so, you see," ended the lawyer, pushing his papers gently together, "you have solved the mystery quite cheaply. You simply have to grin and say nothing. For, to put it all in a nutshell, the pair who came as 'police' and cleared you out again, with a fifteen-pound 'silencer' into the bargain, were two of the selfsame gang who sold you the stolen goods—as likely as not the original pair, 'got up' elaborately for the occasion. I think that's

all, Mr. Kingdom—except that one really can't help admiring rogues deep enough to get the better of *you*. . . . Let me help you!—there! I'd have one more drop of brandy, if I were you, and then drop the enervating habit. Good-day!—*good*-day!"

CHAPTER XXIX

OH, it's lovely — it's almost like heaven!" said Tilly, so unfeignedly, even reverently, that the other passengers turned to scan her and envy her experience. "Ah, Jimmy, I do think you ought to be a little bit grateful for being alive. *I* am!"

And she snatched hold of Jimmy's reluctant arm and drew it within her own and caressed it determinedly, gazing along at the other passengers with a supreme outward composure, but none the less obviously a little light-headed—just as likely to begin weeping as laughing.

For this was the long-deferred realization of her small dream; and it was not to be expected that she could make any one else understand what she felt, or why she felt it. They had just settled down in the rear seat atop of a palatial electric-car starting from Highgate, and away majestically it went gliding up the slope toward seven-mile-distant Barnet. The sun was doing its best at intervals, and the air came in warm, rich puffs that set the blood rioting or lulled it into dreamy ecstasy—according to temperament and circumstances. It was still only half-past ten, with practically the entire day ahead of them. And, moreover—surpassing all, maybe—on the next seat, facing Tilly, and with an abstractedly watchful eye upon Jimmy, sat great big Bob Kingdom.

"Make it Easter Tuesday," Bob Kingdom had written, after a great deal of knotty cogitation, "and I might manage the day 'off' myself, being so close on holiday. Otherwise, no go. Could fetch him from the 'Over-

flow,' as I'm up that way, and pick you up round about Highbury. Save time. Think it over."

It had wanted no thinking over, however. Tilly, in a whirl of incredulous delight, had gone straight up to her mistress, dispensed with all finesse, and laid the letter down in front of her.

"Dear me," said the mistress, hesitating on principle. "I can scarcely tell just how I shall be placed a fortnight ahead, can I? But, still, as I suppose this is an exceptional thing, I must see what can be done. Is this the name of your young man, then—'R. Kingdom'?"

"Oh, no, mum," said Tilly, made to blush. "He's only a friend. That's the one who came over to let you know I was queer, at Christmas, if you remember, mum—a very big, quiet party."

"Oh, is it?" reflected the mistress, able to recall the party at once. "Yes, I remember thinking him a very singular person—if that's the one."

"Oh, he's not, mum," said Tilly, warmly. "He's the very reverse. He's one of those you get to like a little bit more each time you see them."

"Oh, I see," said the mistress. "Perhaps I had better say no more."

"Barnet" being Bob's own suggestion, promptly the Purfleet or Southend idea had faded from Tilly's mind. "Be ready for Barnet," she had written off to Jimmy Westaway at once. "The doctor said you could have any day so long as we gave twenty-four hours' notice; so it's Easter Tuesday. Say it over and over to yourself, and then you won't forget it. And mind, Jimmy, you wash your neck and make up your mind to make the most of it; for goodness knows when I can manage it again, and I shouldn't like to disgrace Mr. Kingdom, as it's so open on top of the tram we are to take, and a dirty neck is the surest sign of not caring how you look or what becomes of you."

"Goodness knows where Barnet is, or what it looks like when you get there," she added to herself, as she licked the envelope and fastened it. "But I suppose being a man himself, he knows what Jimmy 'ud like most. Oh, if it goes and rains, I don't think I should ever get over it; it 'ud seem as if I'd done it purposely."

And so it had come about quite simply that Bob Kingdom was really the organizer and prime mover; and all Tilly's secret anxieties as to how Jimmy might conduct himself in the circumstances, and whether anything awkward might crop up, were swept away at a stroke. It was just as if Bob had divined! She could lean comfortably back as upon a tower of strength, and no one need ever know how flustered she had felt originally in regard to routes, trains, tickets, etc.

"It's no use," she had admitted to the servant-maid next door, who had loaned her various railway timetables and country-ramble guides. "If you killed me, I could never understand the things. Some of the trains seem to start and never reach the place, and others get there without starting. And every time I *do* seem to get one under my thumb, there's a dot or thingumybob to say it doesn't stop there, or it doesn't run that day, or it's only for horses, or something of that. Bust the things, I say!"

Bob Kingdom never carried an umbrella, but he had unearthed for this occasion what he called a traveling-rug, and that looked to Tilly like a giant's blanket, once very gaudy, but now sobered; and if the vast bulge of his pockets went for anything, he was evidently prepared for all known emergencies. This was the only uncertain note in the proceedings so far—this and the fact that Bob Kingdom had paid for the outward fares before Tilly could draw out her purse. Not knowing what he proposed in the way of eating and drinking, and not caring to ask, she had cut an immense stack of sand-

wiches, and there was just an uncomfortable suspicion that he might have done the same.

"Oh, well," thought Tilly, "I'm not going to worry. It's wicked, on a day like this. Better have too much than not enough. I'm going to be happy, if no one else is."

It occurred to her to squeeze Jimmy's limp arm again, and rouse him a little.

"Come, now, you don't seem to look as if you're enjoying it," she whispered spurringly, aside. "Look at the road—isn't it smooth and lovely? And what about all those old houses over there? Sit up!—make yourself comfortable. Why, it's like being in your own carriage; better, because you can fill your lungs and see what's what as you go along. If you were rich and could go where you wanted, you wouldn't want to go. Here, have a sandwich—you do like something to eat, I know."

Bob Kingdom eyed the unfolding of various wrappers askance, but said nothing as the contents were revealed. Jimmy, who, truly enough, had not seemed in the least impressed by the proceedings so far, clutched at a handful of the sandwiches before Tilly was ready, and dropped half of them.

"There, now—look at that!" said Tilly, as she rescued them, blew the dust off them, and put them underneath the rest. "Ah, well, I'm not going to say a wry word to anybody to-day—I suppose you can't help it. Have one, Mr. Kingdom?" She proffered her pile boldly, feeling quite the matron and minister to men's appetites. "Ham and beef—quite fresh—do!"

"Might as well," said Bob Kingdom, taking two. "Had a pound of apples as we came along—three him, two me. Soon goes, in this air."

"It's lovely!" said Tilly again, "and I'm sure he likes it, if he can't somehow show it. I can hardly believe we're here, myself; generally these outings only 'come

off' in your mind. Oh, Jimmy, you've dropped another lump of meat!—and I got him to cut it so thin, too!"

"Hot," explained Jimmy, shortly.

"Hot? Oh, there, now, I've been and put in mustard; I forgot you've forgotten all about mustard. Give 'em to me—don't throw 'em overboard; I can't bear to see things wasted, even if I had a hundred a year. Wait till we get there, and I'll see if there's any scones. I suppose there's a shop or two there?" she thought to ask Bob Kingdom.

"Lot o' shops," he said. Having once been to Barnet by chance, Barnet remained in his mind as the natural and proper place for any one bent upon a short excursion. The sandwiches had disappeared; he sat with his thick lips well apart, regarding the landscape with a sort of absent fixity, for a little longer; and then gave a jerk of his head.

"Whetstone! Not far, now."

"Fancy!" said Tilly, who had caught the name incorrectly. "D'you hear that, Jimmy?—this is Whitsun; and we're coming through it at Easter. Don't you call that strange, now?—couldn't happen on any other day. Like to live here, would you? Only got to step out o' the back door, and you're in a field, with all the animals."

"Better than Stepney, eh?" suggested Bob Kingdom.

"Oh, I don't know!" responded Tilly heartily, to the open amazement of the more refined person wedged beside Bob Kingdom, with her back half turned to him. "I begin to think there's no better place than where you're born and brought up; you get fond of it, somehow, whatever it is; you know all the cracks in the pavement, and the short cuts, and the people, and the shops. I know I've done a quiet cry about it once or twice—can't help it! Poor old Stepney!—good old Row! . . . Now, then, Jimmy, off we go again! It's like being rushed along on velvet springs, ain't it? If you'd lived

a hundred years ago, a ride like this would have cost four pounds instead of four pence — and no saying whether you ever stepped out alive. I'm sure we don't get much, but we may as well be thankful for what does come our way. . . . Oh, there's a lovely white house!" —as the sunshine, darting after a retreating line of cloud-shadow, bathed the walls of a substantial residence, glimmering pallid and palace-like, and reared aloofly beyond an emerald-green meadow. "Well, there's some rooms to clean up in that place, I should say. Wonderful thing, isn't it, how easy some people seem to lay hold of the money, and pick their own bit o' ground. What would that be worth, now?"

"Might be two thousand, all told—or, again, might be five thousand," conjectured Bob Kingdom at a venture —the house being far behind now.

"Just fancy!" mused Tilly. "And mother's in one cupboard of a room, with the use of the landing if she can get it! Ah, well, we mustn't talk about that—not to-day. Hark, there's some one playing a concertina; sounds quite sea-sidey, doesn't it? Quick, see the cows, Jimmy—some with brown spots and some with black; you won't see a country cow again for some time, p'raps. There, now!" —with another rousing nudge in his ribs. "Look at the sky now!—all blue and gold. Ain't you lucky! Think o' poor Doctor Dempsey, shut up in that room with all his books and bother, while you're bowling along like a Nabob. And if you only behave yourself, you don't know but what you'll have another day somewhere else before the summer's out. Have another sandwich, Mr. Kingdom, before I put 'em away; it's a pity to carry 'em all home again just because o' the mustard. And I went and bought a penny tin of my own, too, so as to feel free of the mistress. Always the way!"

Bob Kingdom obliged, eating rather audibly. The refined person next to him edged a little farther away, and

looked Tilly up and down once more; but happily both were unconscious of any wounded susceptibilities. As for Jimmy, his attitude remained typically furtive and baffling. The car twisted and glided and carried its living freight onward almost noiselessly, like a stately ship at sea. Tilly sang something happily to herself, and then stopped because a man outside a public-house drowned her attempt with "Annie Laurie," and it made her think of old times that could never, never come again. And then presently they had stopped—at the foot of the long hill climbing up into Barnet.

"We're there," murmured Bob Kingdom. "Keep still; let 'em all get down. . . . Now, then!" They formed the tail of a small procession mounting the hill. "Barnet Fair," said Bob, indicating the grassy space to right and left.

"Where—where?" asked Tilly eagerly. "Here, it's Barnet Fair, Jimmy—well, if you ain't double lucky!"

"No, not to-day," corrected Bob Kingdom. "Where they have it when it's on, I mean."

"Oh!" said Tilly. "Well, never mind; good luck to it, whenever it is. That's what Alice always says—you make your own happiness; and I've come to believe it. What d'you say, Mr. Kingdom?"

What Bob Kingdom thought was apparently too deep for expression, as he answered indirectly. "Shops in a minute," he said.

"Well, I'm leaving it all to you," laughed Tilly. "Where we are, or where we're going, I haven't the least idea. I was half afraid it might turn out a one-eyed place like that Pangfield, where you can't do anything or buy anything. That was a terror, and no mistake. I can smell just the same sort of air, though—can't you, Jimmy?—burning wood and fried bacon. If you'd only look up a bit, instead of at the ground all the time, you'd get brown in this sun. Look at Mr. Kingdom—he's taken

his cap off. . . . My word, it's a regular big town, isn't it?"

It was; but in due course they arrived at the farther end of it—the only difference being that Bob Kingdom was now carrying several small parcels, besides bottles of ginger-beer, and resembled a very solid Santa Claus. And now, as at length he wheeled to the right, and the main road was left farther and farther behind them, the prospect ahead became a soft, soothing expanse of wooded country, where the silence itself seemed audible. And now it became apparent that Bob Kingdom had known what he was about. Farther and farther off the beaten track he led the way, and soon they were moving from mysterious glade to glade, where the intercepted sun struck down lemon and puce lances of light—as if it had penetrated the stained windows of a cathedral.

"Hadley Woods—heart of it," said Bob Kingdom, pausing at last. "Like it?"

Tilly gazed about her, awed by the fading and reappearing tints—struck, more than all, by the wonderful stillness, which distant voices, echoings, and the chatter of birds could only seem to deepen. Brooding peace ringed them about; and the yielding leaf-soil under their feet gave out a scent that was like the faint commingling of mushrooms and cowslip odors.

"Like it?" whispered Tilly. "You can't ask me that. . . . I didn't think I cared for the country, but I don't know—it seems all different to-day, somehow. To think you can get out to a place like this in an hour or so!—who'd believe it?"

"Mustn't go any farther," said Bob Kingdom, who was looking about him with a more practical eye. "Been walking over an hour, since we left the tram. Ought to be all right here, didn't he? May as well make a start. If we do it, it'll be done."

Depositing his parcels, he unfolded the huge "blanket,"

and revealed a mat bag that had been skewered to the interior. This he placed carefully aside while, with Tilly's expert help, he spread the rug over the grass. There was ample sitting-room upon it for all three, with a fair space left in the middle; and one end reached an arched log, which served as a back-rest.

"I didn't dream it was going to be a *real* picnic," said Tilly, almost thrilled. "If there was only a tiger or two in the trees, I should think I was in the tropics, as they say. Here you are, Jimmy!—don't stand there looking as if you're a beggar come up for the crusts and crumbs. Where shall he sit, Mr. Kingdom?"

"Against the log—you and him," directed Bob Kingdom. "Lay out the sandwiches."

This last, as Tilly realized next instant, was a bit of tact that brought a silly thickness to her throat. For, just as she was pluming herself upon her forethought and independence, Bob Kingdom opened his own mat bag. Down beside the sandwiches he placed a rich brown conical pie, such as Tilly had seen in exclusive City-restaurant windows, occasionally crowned by a stuffed peacock.

"Home-made," he said briefly.

"What!" she cried, faintly. "Do you—do you mean to say your dear old mother made that for to-day—for *us?*"

"Knew we'd want something solid," explained Bob. He scratched his neck, and jerked out the rest: "Sent her love all round—wasn't to forget that. Now, then!"

Out came a big clasp-knife, wiped carefully upon his sleeve. With one powerful drive Bob severed the pie. Even Jimmy seemed to hold his breath, as the two halves fell apart, and a solid wedge of pink meat and golden jelly was disclosed. Two more cuts, and the pie was in four pieces.

"One for him to take back with him to-night under his

coat," Bob muttered. "All good stuff; no scraps; make a start!"

He led the way, with a chunk in his left hand, while with the right he rummaged in his pocket, produced some hard-boiled eggs, pepper and salt in separate twists of paper, and—needless to say—a bag of apples.

"Onions a bit 'off' lately," he said. "Springs ones not properly sprung yet. Pie all right?"

"I never tasted anything like it," answered Tilly, with all the conviction at her command. "If Jimmy doesn't, it must be because he can't tell one thing from another. It's wonderful. To think of the hours it took her to make it—and the minutes we're taking to eat it!"

Yes, it was a wonderful meal—one that lived in Tilly's memory. It seemed incredible at first, but somehow the eggs went the way of the pie, and the ginger-beer tasted more and more like champagne; and then, when Tilly really felt that she could eat no more, and was almost ashamed of herself, Bob Kingdom put on a bag of peppermint-stick as dessert. "Hadley Wood rock," he named it—and Tilly would not have been at all surprised if a pint of periwinkles had followed. But at last, with a sigh of content, he put away his clasp-knife, and rose and stretched himself. And Tilly lay back against her log, and watched him, and thought of the hundreds he had in the bank, and asked herself what need there ever could be for him to think of a wife.

He strolled away for a spell, and came back to find Tilly engaged in a mild tussle with the guest of the occasion.

"Here, look at this, Mr. Kingdom," she called. "He's found these things sprouting under the log, and says they're mushrooms; I was just in time to stop him bolting them down. They're not, are they?"

Bob Kingdom eyed the greenish-yellow growth doubtfully. "Might be," he pondered. "Never seen 'em up

for sale. Shouldn't go any farther than touching 'em; funny things; never know what they're made of. Wants something to do, don't he? Here!—nearly forgot."

He fished from his marvelous pockets—first, a folded stack of colored, comic periodicals, and then a paper-bag of something that crackled dryly.

"Monkey-nuts!" gasped Tilly. "There, now, imagine you thinking of them!—and the comics, too! If that don't keep him in a quiet giggle, nothing will. Look, Jimmy!"

And as it proved, Bob Kingdom had had an inspiration. Between the nuts and the pictures, Jimmy became absorbed, and lost to his surroundings.

"Fancy!" whispered Tilly, half sadly. "Knows he's only got till seven-thirty to the minute—knows what he's going back to—and yet can be happy over monkey-nuts and jokes! Shows, doesn't it? But I mustn't leave him —I wouldn't lose sight of him and have any chasing in a place like this for worlds. Still, you're not to feel tied-up on our account; you go for a walk, Mr. Kingdom, if you fancy it; I know you're a rare one for being on your feet."

"Try a change, for once," said Bob Kingdom, sitting down with his great lower limbs crossed tailor-wise, and regarding her contemplatively. "Quiet, ain't it? Steady your nerves, eh? Better than in a crowd. Feel all right now, eh?"

"I feel," said Tilly, trying to smile at him through half-closed eyes, "I feel just ready to slide into the loveliest doze. Seems like a fairy-land; and you look all misty, as if you're only half there. I suppose it's the excitement, and not sleeping, and getting up extra early. I hardly knew where I was, or what I was doing, till I found myself perched on the car at Highgate; and that's the truth."

"Have a nap," urged Bob Kingdom. "Bad lying down

—blood goes to your brain; but all right sitting up—food digests. Keep my eye on him all right. You slide off!"

"The idea!" cried Tilly, rousing resolutely. "A nice waste of time, on a day like this—and after a dinner like that, too! No, I don't often have the chance to sit and think, with my hands in front of me like ornaments, do I?" She clasped the hands around her drawn-up knees, and looked at him reminiscently. "Well, Mr. Kingdom, here we are. Everything seems all right at last. Everything's happened now that *can* happen, I should say!"

"I should say so," his lips moved in response, when he grasped the point.

"Doesn't it seem strange, I mean," she pursued, "to think it *has* all happened, and that we're sitting here like this? You"—with an unconscious little shiver—"might have been dead on the spot that night, and Alice's poor husband might be the same—or, at least, back in the asylum, which isn't very different. As it is, there you are, large as life, and nearly forgotten all about it; and he's almost well again, and quite cured, the doctors think—by a sort of miracle, as you might say. And now I wonder what's going to come of it all? Ah, and I mustn't forget about your poor father—*he's* only just getting over a 'stroke' that might have taken him off and shut the shop up for good! That was another bit o' mystery, wasn't it?"

"Seemed so," ruminated Bob Kingdom. "Don't appear to know anything about it himself; so it must be. Took bad in the street, and carried home. Kept raving on about losing money, and thieves in the house, and all that. Couldn't make top or tail of it. Money's round at the bank all right. Dunno what else he had in the place."

"Ah," said Tilly, with acumen. "That's just the way in delirium, you'll notice—they always say just the op-

posite to what's really happened, just the same as mad people always turn against those they're really fondest of! Very likely, when the truth's known, it'll leak out he's *made* money, instead of losing any. You see!"

"Hasn't mentioned it, then," reflected Bob Kingdom. "Lost a lot o' fat, if that's anything. Couple o' stone missing, when he pulled round again; dunno what had become of it. Mustn't touch any more beer; so he's gone down to a Home of Rest at the seaside, where he can't get any. Got to stay there a matter o' months. Says he's getting too thin for his clothes. Rum go, all round."

"Never mind; it must be for the best, when we can look at it properly," said Tilly, softly. "P'raps, if nothing ever happened to pull us up, we should all get upstart and bumptious, and forget there's a God above, and never try to help one another. I'm sure, if Alice can think like that still, I ought to; for I've got my health and strength, and that seems everything, when you look round and see that very often rich people can't enjoy their money. I'm sure, there's a Jew tobacconist not far from us, where master sends me for a paper or tobacco now and then. I've heard him say he worked night and day for years to make money and get on; and now he's done it, his digestion's gone all upside down, and he'd give every farthing to get it put right again. So there you are!"

"And when he got it right again, he'd start money-making afresh, eh?" suggested Bob Kingdom, not to be outdone.

"Very likely," said Tilly, forced to laugh. "So p'raps I'm best off as I am, after all. I've got no temptation one way or the other. Any extra shilling *I* ever make—well, I can see it mor'gaged and spent long beforehand. There'll be no wrapping it up in a napkin and putting it under a bushel-basket."

"Going to stop there at Highbury till—till you leave it?" queried Bob Kingdom, at a loss to express himself more cogently.

"Goodness knows," said Tilly, gazing beyond him. "I won't say I'm bubbling with joy there, just for the sake of saying it; because I feel terrible lonely at times—shut out from everything and everybody; I don't feel as if I belong to myself at all. And when there *is* any life or change upstairs, it's not for me; it only makes me a bit extra to do in the kitchen; and I get that tired and 'low' sometimes that I have a good cry when I go to bed. If it wasn't for feeling I'm near Alice, and knowing what she'd say, I might often think it was better to have the run of the streets again, even in rags. But there—'Count your blessings!'"

She had looked away; but Bob Kingdom, to his wonder, made out that her eyes were full of unshed tears. As he considered the matter, she rose.

"Er—yes," he said; "you go for a bit of a stroll by yourself—not too far. Shout out, if you can't find us again. He'll be all right. Few deep breaths do you a lot of good."

"God bless you, Mr. Kingdom," said Tilly, as quietly and carelessly as possible. "I mustn't say any more than that, I know; but there's more than one little thing I shan't ever forget. To-day's one of 'em."

She wandered slowly away, pretending to be very much struck by the hue of the grass and the fact that the blue sky blended with it. As soon as she had skirted a clump of budding blackberry bushes, she turned to look back at the "camp" and see just what Bob Kingdom was doing.

"Fancy that!" she said to herself involuntarily.

Bob Kingdom, although not blessed with any sense of humor himself, had converted his handkerchief into a

"rabbit," for Jimmy's edification, and sat soberly stolid while he made it perform all sorts of presumably life-like antics. Jimmy threw a nut at it petulantly; and this gave the conjurer a fresh idea. He dug the tip of Tilly's umbrella into the grass, balanced the rabbit on the handle, stimulated Jimmy to try and dislodge it from a distance, and patiently collected all the small ammunition within reach, while Jimmy threw and threw. Jimmy at length did the trick by accident, and seemed almost excited when Bob Kingdom, trying in turn, was apparently beaten. Bob next, after several laborious attempts, succeeded in turning head over heels; and at this—although Tilly was never quite certain — Jimmy actually appeared to *laugh*. At any rate, Bob essayed it again, and again, until he collapsed in a heap, conceivably dizzy. But Tilly could not even smile.

"Yes, you faithful!" she whispered, echoing Alice Richards' word, which had appealed to her as inspired. "I don't think," she added, with a choke, "I don't think I could bear to hear he'd got hold of some wife who didn't understand him, and tried to change him!"

With little cries of real delight, presently, she bent over a bed of wild hyacinths.

"Bluebells!—bluebells of Scotland! Oh, you little dears! Oh, I must take a few home to the mistress, to show her I've really been here! Oh, I think I *do* love the country, after all!"

She picked and picked, singing aloud meanwhile to maintain the "heavenly" element, and to disperse an idea that somebody must be watching her plottingly from behind a tree or bush. Breathless, at length, she made her way back with an armful; and was astounded to hear that she had been absent more than an hour.

"Just getting a bit anxious," admitted Bob Kingdom, wiping his forehead after some physical exertions wit-

nessed by no human eye save Jimmy Westaway's. "What's up with your foot? No, that one!"

"Well, I was just walking along," said Tilly, "and all of a sudden it went down into a lot of slosh. You couldn't see anything—the place was covered up with ferns and leaves; but there's a regular little pond underneath. Before I knew it, my foot was soaked. But that's nothing."

"Dunno so much," said Bob Kingdom, eying the foot dubiously. "Better take your stocking off, anyway. Knew a chap that got his feet like that on a Bank Holiday; laughed it off, but can't walk at all now—all twisted up—rheumatics. Let's feel." He felt the boot, and looked at his hand. "Sit down; soon have it off; dry a bit before we start back; be on safe side."

He unbuttoned and drew off the boot. Just as simply he tugged at the wet stocking till it came away, and wrung some moisture from it. Very pale, but determined not to feel ashamed, Tilly sat on the log, while with his "rabbit" handkerchief he applied a little friction to her stained foot. Indeed, breathing audibly over his task, he got it quite dry and clean; and then drew the upper half of the stocking over it, and gave it a final encouraging rub.

"All right now." He picked up the boot, which felt like a clammy piece of cardboard, and looked at it all ways, and tapped the sole. "Just as well. Wouldn't stand much," he said, always interested in essential details of that kind. "None too much leather about these, eh?"

"I know," faltered Tilly, the color rushing back to her cheeks. "I couldn't expect much. Don't look at it, Mr. Kingdom! I only gave two-and-eleven for the pair."

"How much?" queried Bob, visibly staggered.

"Two-and-eleven. I did want to give a little more, but

I couldn't. I'd sent my stronger ones to mother—thinking the winter was all over. I suppose—I suppose you give a good deal more for yours, Mr. Kingdom?"

"Bit more than that," he owned, thoughtfully. "Guinea, mine. Cheaper in the long run, eh? Last a couple o' years, day in, day out."

"A guinea!" cried Tilly, in horror. "I should expect 'em to last for life—and then do some one a turn. A guinea! Why, that's twenty-one shillings, isn't it? Good gracious, I think I should have to look at the boots and come away again. Wherever should I get a guinea from—to spare at a leap like that, I mean?"

"Might have asked me," he reflected. "Pay back when you could—nothing in that. Don't like these cheap boots—not for women; call 'em dear—call 'em death-traps. Lot o' women gone 'home' through 'em—don't like to say their boots 'let water.' You couldn't wear one o' mine, or else——" The fact was so obvious that he stopped there, and contented himself with fitting the two-and-eleven boot on the umbrella-top. "Got a good while yet—dry the worst out of it. Shan't be very long."

"Where are you going?" breathed Tilly, beginning to feel that the scene without him was like a frame without a picture. And Bob gave several explanatory jerks, showing her the ginger-beer bottles.

"Cottage with 'Teas' outside just up the road, as we came along. Get these filled up with hot tea and bring 'em back. Got some bread-and-butter and shrimps—and the sandwiches. Take him with me, for a run."

"Well, for goodness' sake, find your way back to me," said Tilly, happily. "I shouldn't mind being lost in London, but here—! Off you go, then. Come on, Jimmy—you can't live on those comics! Mr. Kingdom's going to show you something fresh. My word, what a day you're having!"

Left alone, she slipped down to the rug, laid her head

against the log, and thought; thought about the long stretch of days behind her, and the still longer stretch ahead, if nothing happened. . . . And the next thing she knew was that she had been dreaming of a bluebell carpet —of Alice's quiet room—of the clang-clang of electric-car bells—of guinea boots too wonderful to be worn on a dirty pavement—and of Bob Kingdom's great but not clumsy hands pressing and warming her foot.

"Oh!" she sighed.

He was standing over her, just the beginnings of a grin on his "white negro" face, as he laid a bottle full of fairly hot tea against her neck. This was as far as his ideas of pleasantry, even on a picnic, would go.

"Quarter-past four," he said. "Must make a move back in an hour."

There were no cups; but the shrimps and sandwiches, with several other etceteras, had been laid ready while she dozed; and all was still real peace, within and without.

And so that dream-day drew to a close, and Bob Kingdom gathered up the remnants, and folded his rug, while Tilly looked around at her glades and coppices, and could hardly believe that she might never see them again. And so, a little tired, but unspeakably grateful, she trudged back toward Barnet Hill, clutching her limp bluebells in one arm and holding Jimmy with the other. Jimmy had behaved himself beyond all expectations.

There was a mist in her eyes, and an awkward swelling in her throat, for a moment as, at twenty-nine minutes past seven, Jimmy Westaway drooped his head and passed back into the "Overflow," and the gates closed upon him, leaving they two outside; but the moment soon passed.

"I'm a funny one," she said; "I can never say 'good-bye' or even 'good-night' to any one without feeling—well, there, never mind! And now it's all over, and

back to work; and I don't know when I may see you again. Such is life, Mr. Kingdom!"

"Such is," he confirmed. "All right, though, if you make the best of it—eh?"

"I'm going to," said Tilly, quite steadily. "I mean to! Good-bye!"

CHAPTER XXX

YES, you shall put the kettle on the gas, Tilly—the small brass one—with about half a pint of water—not more. I'll ring when I require it. I think that will be all to-night."

"Right you are, mum—the small brass one—I know!"

Three weeks had gone, and it was close upon ten o'clock, p.m., as Tilly obeyed the instruction and hurried back into the breakfast-parlor to complete a letter she had begun two days before, and which had been thrust out of sight under a flower-pot quite half a dozen times. Not that there was any real need for secrecy—the mistress seldom came down into this room; but Tilly's letters to Alice, especially just of late, revealed her heart in a way that she regarded as semi-sacred.

". . . And now, dear Alice, where was I? Well, I really think I must be coming to an end—ten pages—rambling ones, I'm afraid. But only to think that this letter I'm touching is going all the way to Dovercourt, straight into your hands, for a penny, and that I cannot come with it for love or money! It's as much to me, dear, as though you were both at the other end of the world. When I walked down Wickham Terrace, a night or two ago, and saw your rooms all dark and shut up, I stood as if my heart had stopped, although I'd known beforehand. I felt almost as if I had had enough of my life—as if there was nothing more to live for, I mean. I knew I was wrong, and I came home and prayed about it; but if every one had to keep on praying about these little things as much as I do, I'm afraid there wouldn't

be much work done. Still, never mind me, dear! If the air there is building your husband up so, and making a new man of him in both ways, the idea of me trying to drag you back! The doctors knew best. I thought it was just like you to send that letter and book of poems to Doctor Dempsey, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if it strikes him as more wonderful than the cure; I don't suppose he gets thanked too much for doing a little over and above what he's paid for. Yes, I fully believe he will value the letter as much as the bound book. Fancy, you will never walk into the Overflow again! When I have to go to see Jimmy, I shall feel. . . ."

Tilly was quite a fluent writer when she struck a vein; when it broke off, she was at a temporary loss to resume. She had paused this time because a flood of weeping, long imminent, had threatened to burst. However, she bit her lip very hard, ran and lowered the gas under the small kettle, and settled herself down to the closing words.

"Take no notice of me, dear. So sorry that Mr. Richards had to part with his precious books to raise money; but what's that, if you've still got him to love and care for? That's everything! I'm sure, it's something almost too wonderful to think of him being taken for the post of assistant liberian at the library there. Earning money a week, too! Oh, how you must feel about it!

"You asked about mother and Giddy, dear. Well, I should like to hatch up a beautiful lie, but I mustn't. She's one of those persons that, because they don't like writing, never write, and think it ought not to be expected of them. But I heard from a certain party that they were on the parish, and going on as well as could be expected; and when I hear that about poor mother, I know that the wisest thing I can do is to hope for the best. Don't fear, dear; I shall always stand by her, and

do my utmost. Of course, I couldn't expect that my half-crown a week would fill their mouths as well as pay for the room. (I don't mean anything bitter or underhand by that, Alice.) I also heard that Giddy had given up papers—or them given him up—and joined a man in a firewood round; which doesn't sound any too bright, as he can't shout properly, and wood being 'off' in the warmer weather. Ah, well! No doubt he'll be taken care of somehow, as he didn't ask to be born into Porter Street.

"Good-night, Alice dear! Good-night, Mr. Richards! I've brought myself to realize that you won't be coming back again, and that your life together has begun afresh, so to put it. And now, perhaps, I shall begin to think about my own future. Which means, Alice, that I may have to think of a change, for good or evil. I'm so lonely and shut off here. I read my text, and think about the noble deeds, but that's all I can do; then I'm off cleaning saucepans and scrubbing stairs again. Where's the noble deeds? I want to get into something where I can *help*, and get a smile and a kind word back for it, as well as just earn my money. And they tell me that if I write to some great lady at the Guild of the Brave Poor Things—but I'm running past myself, and worrying you with my little worries. Good-night, dear!—never good-bye—not quite!

"Your loving TILLY."

As she licked the envelope-flap a burning thrill went through her—a thrill that simultaneously seemed to turn cold. From just outside the window—from the railing above the area, at any rate—there had sounded a low, sweet warbling; a man had pouted his lips to trill just a few mocking, memory-stirring notes. Only a second later, Tilly heard a stealthy descent of the area

stone steps, and gathered that he was within a few inches of her.

She had been standing between the light and the window, and so her shadow had caught upon the blind. And Tilly knew that it was of no use to cry out. Bert Lovell loved mischief for its own sake, and rather welcomed consequences than feared them. He was essentially a night-bird, too; and night-birds are as elusive as sinister. She told herself that he had pressed his face to the glass, and was smiling—waiting for her to fling back the blind in fear.

She backed slowly from it, and then, on an impulse which there was no time to examine, stole swiftly along the passage and opened the lower door.

"You would, would you?" she whispered, with trembling vehemence. "You dare to come back here, you dirty snake——"

She stopped. He had snatched hold of her wrists—and then flung an arm around her, and pulled her to him, and looked down into her face. Ay, he was smiling; smiling just like a man worked up to any exploit and drunk with the danger and daring of it.

"How goes it, Tilly, old gel?—how goes it? No, no, don't shout and spoil it all; don't open your mouth like that—that's mine!"

He plunged his lips against hers, and glued them into silence. When he had taken his fill, and laughed pantingly, Tilly's head drooped back. In shame, in faintness, and yet afraid of herself—afraid lest she might be made to sink her detestation, and remember only that she had once waited for him with a hopefully beating heart and belief—she fought free, and tried to close the door. Close it she did—to realize that he was inside.

'Don't, Bert—don't do it!" she whimpered. "You're forgetting yourself altogether—you don't know what you're doing!"

"Oh, yes, I do," he told her, quite coolly. "I was coming in; and I'm in. Waited my chance long enough, haven't I? I should say so, old gel! Now, then; if the duchess upstairs kicks, I'm your young man, ain't I? That's good enough; you told her that yourself. She'll know it's me, if I whistle a bit. I want one more kiss like that—quick! I'm fair hungry for it—mad for it!"

Tilly escaped him, and fled back to the breakfast-parlor—and he tiptoed fast behind, as if challenged to it. In dumb horror she stood with both hands up to her face, gazing at him—afraid of him, yet still more afraid to cry out. If he looked pallid, he looked evil in his recklessness. He was as a ghost that had suddenly flung open the curtains of the past and leaped at her.

"Don't, Bert!" she entreated again, earnestly. "Don't get me into disgrace, just for—just to get me put out into the street——"

Ting-a-ling-ling!

The mistress's bell.

"What's that?" asked Bert. He had perched himself on the edge of the table, his cap pushed back to show the dark "Jewey" ringlets beneath. "That for you? . . . Go on, then—I'll wait. I'll have something to say, if she hops down here. Go on!—I'm not frightened. You're all right; she can't kill you—more can I!"

A pause. Ting-a-ling-ling!

Tilly shivered to consciousness and started forward automatically. Pouring the hot water into a jug, she went slowly up the stairs, waited a moment, and then tapped. Did her mistress answer "Come in!" all was over then and there; her eyes shone with fear and her face was colorless. But the mistress did not, because the master was in there, smoking a cigar as he read the newspaper; and while he appeared to have a great respect for Tilly in the abstract, he disliked her intrusions in the concrete.

"Half a second, Tilly," said the mistress, hastily. The cat bouncing from her lap had carried away a skein of silk. "Thank you; that will be all, then. You can lock up and go to bed as soon as you like; we are going ourselves, presently."

"Right, mum," said Tilly, faintly.

As she reached the lower passage, she saw that the area door at the end stood open again, letting in a current of warm, summer-like air; but she did not grasp that this meant anything until she re-entered the breakfast-parlor, and stared around, little gasps breaking in her throat.

"Oh, he's gone! He's gone!" she cried almost loudly in her gratitude.

She ran to the outer door, and shot both bolts, and turned the key, while her chance held. Then she ran back, to see what it was he had written and left upon the table. Just a few large words, scrawled with her own pen wastefully across a sheet of her own notepaper.

"So be it, old girl. Won't get you the sack this time. But you're not done with me—not in this world. So long! BERT."

"Yes, you coward!" she sobbed, as she tore the paper to fragments. "You knew better! You knew better than to wait and drive me to something!"

With a shudder she wiped her lips, where the sting of his contact seemed to smart still. Almost, for the moment, she wished his bravado had endured just a little longer—just long enough for her to surmount the shock and show him that a woman is not necessarily a man's yielding puppet.

It was past midnight when she fastened her nightdress and sank down by the bed to repeat her prayers—and

mean them. She had sat there, with her hands linked loosely upon her lap, waiting for the trembling-fit to wear away, and telling herself that to-night's happening had only brought the vague change in her career a little nearer. She had her small secret pride—pride in sex that entitled her to love and maternity; and she had not dwelt too closely upon the mystery element—the mystery as to why Bert Lovell should single her out for pursuit, even if erratically, when there were so many women able and willing to shut their eyes to his defects.

"Oh, Heavenly Father," she said, with her face upturned to the unmeasured spaces above earth—which for her were quite limited and definite.

"Keep with me—more than ever now! Watch Jimmy and Giddy, and say to mother what no one else can! Bless Alice and her dear one; and if I'm never to be as happy as her——"

She swayed upright and looked at the door, as if some one had knocked. Of course, there had not been sound of any kind; the knocking was in Tilly's heart alone. She stood there motionless, with dilated eyes and whitened lips—as if she knew that, in this stillness, something was happening.

Unawares, as she prayed, she had reconstructed the scene in the breakfast-parlor, two hours ago. And a mental light had shot up—just like the sudden revealing quiver of the electric street-lamps at dusk.

She stirred, and looked at her candle—burned nearly half-way down.

"Now—now—be calm!" she said to herself, with fine steadiness. "Just you keep quite calm! If you *do* believe in a God, and know very well that He's looking straight down. . . ."

She opened her door without making a sound, and tiptoed on her bare feet to the balustrade, to look over. On the landing below, off which the master and mistress

slept, all was dark and quiet; and the darkness seemed to plunge down unbroken, past drawing and dining-rooms, to the deep kitchen level. But Tilly, catching up the hem of her nightdress a little, felt her way on and down as with a fixity of belief that permitted no wavering.

Yes, she was very calm; so much so that she recollected the board which creaked at the foot of the first flight, and stepped over it. Bending there, she could have given a thump upon the door of the mistress's room; but that did not seem possible—or, more correctly, she deliberately stifled the impulse, as if this concerned herself alone. In the same steadily creeping way, she reached the next landing—the broad hall, with the large room on either side.

And now, strangely enough, it had come to seem—not merely that she had dreaded, but that she had *known*. She ought to give a scream; but she could not. She was awed by her own unnatural composure, as she took a noiseless little run and pushed open wide the door that had been standing ajar—the dining-room door, past which a weak little light shone out. Her voice came to her, not with a screech of realization, but in a moan of scorn and misery.

"You wicked devil!" she said slowly—the human girl of Porter Street again for a moment. "Oh, you wicked devil, you've come to this, have you?"

Bert Lovell, with one hand upon the marble mantelshelf and the other reaching back to a table, stood transfixed in that position. There was not the faintest sound of any sort; he was simply numbed, powerless, void of realization. Not until Tilly took a firm step toward him, and pointed to the table, and darted her face forward and shook it in a silent but burning contempt, could he seem to know what had happened. Then his head gave a limp roll; his arms collapsed to his sides; he staggered back

st a heavy chair, and, more by accident than accu-, slid into the seat.

"Keep still," he whispered, weakly. "I'm bad; keep— still."

The sweat broke and poured down his face; surge after e of nausea appeared to shake him, as he lay back d just looked at her, without the strength to lift a fin-. Tilly gave out a little sound that was between a sob d a derisive laugh.

"Be quick! Make haste!" she advised him. "I've done u; I've done you to-night, you wicked devil. Not a ing of theirs do you touch again—oh, no!"

Another pause.

"All right," Bert said, with a heave and a rattle. "I'm one. Wipe my forehead, old girl—do that!"

And, oddly enough, with only another gesture of complete scorn, Tilly moved forward, plucked at a silk handkerchief hanging from his breast-pocket, knocked his cap away, and wiped his forehead—then his lips. She ended by clamping her small hand around his throat as in a spasm of anger and mortification.

"I would, if I could!" she strained to say, with sobs, her face close to his. "I would!—if only to save you worse—the hangman! He's got you—he's got you—it won't be long! You vile thing! . . . Now! Get on your feet. Put these things back, every one of them—no, I'll do that; you shan't touch 'em! Pick up your cap—vile!—pick it up, and slink out while I can let you, and think how you've tried to break my heart! I'm as bad as you, to do it! I've got to think that I let you escape, because I once let myself kiss you. You hound, with your curls and your kisses!—oh, God, you hound! Why don't I strangle you?—why don't I put an end to you?"

Bert twisted slowly under her outstretched, quivering arm, picked up his cap, stood back, gave his trousers an

automatic hitch, seemed to be surprised at his own passivity, gradually clenched his hands—and now stood drawn up, like a man stung into showing fight.

"Hold hard!" he said, in his ordinary voice. He listened intently, and all was still. "Now, then, who d'you reckon you are?—what d'you think you're doing? Don't be quite so quick, old girl. I'm not gone yet."

"You're not—*what?*" breathed Tilly, her body arched as for a leap at him. "One moment more, and you'll have no chance of it. One moment more, and that door'll be locked on you—and you'll be in a thieves' prison before daylight. You! A woman's done you!"

Bert, almost recovered, almost careless, put a hand in his inner breast-pocket and drew out a small revolver, and pointed it at the floor, standing as at ease.

"After this has gone off—not before," he said. "No door 'll be locked, my girl. Come to myself a bit, haven't I? I should think so!"—as she shrank back, with clasped fingers, and a catch of her breath. "Now, then, don't you be silly; I know what I'm up to. See all these things here? Well, they're mine; they're going with me. And don't tell yourself you're in the way a bit; because you're not."

The table was covered. Tilly realized that the entire room was in what she would have termed heartbreaking muddle. Dimly, incredulously, she grasped that the opposite room—the drawing-room—had been ransacked, too; because she recognized that some of the stacked valuables were out of place here. It was her turn now to stand as though dumb and bloodless; her artificial effort had run down—weakened in proportion as his revived.

"And that's not all." He licked his lips and put back the revolver into his pocket. "Now you *are* here, you'll keep here and give me a hand. . . . I don't want to start shooting at anybody. There's no occasion. If you

make another sound, or do anything silly, I simply shan't move. See? They can find me in here, with all the doors locked and bolted; and you can't say a word for yourself, can you? Not a word!"

"What?" whispered Tilly, her grip upon the real position almost gone. "What's that?" she repeated, watching as in a deadly fascination.

"What's that?" he mocked, swinging his arm at her. "I'm your 'young man,' didn't I say? She knows that from you, doesn't she? Then, she'll know who let me in here—you! . . . So you did; but you thought you'd let me out again, didn't you? Not quite—not this time! . . . Shut that door!—no, stand where you are!"

He sprang softly across and closed it himself, and spat upon his hands, and gave his cap a tightening tug. Almost she might have thought that he was about to break into his whistling and step-dance again, just in callousness—so triumphantly his eyes glittered at her.

"Here you are! Shan't be long, old girl, if you're quick about it. You can shout as much as you like, when I'm clear away. Catch hold!" He had dived beneath the table for what looked like two horses' fodder bags. "Hold this open!"

Tilly shuddered. All around—even herself—seemed somehow to be undergoing a change. Before she knew that she had moved, she had torn the sack from his hands, and had flung her arms about his neck, begging in a sunken, passionate voice.

"Bert! Don't!—don't do it, for my sake! Don't take their things—I'd sooner starve in the street, than let you do it! You can shoot me; you can do what you like; it shan't—it shan't be thought they were robbed through me. They've been so kind—you couldn't! Bert! There's the door; you can go—only go!—and nothing will ever be known about it. Oh, if I can't save you. I'm going to save them!"

"Done?" he asked, as her head dropped and rocked wildly against him. "Are you going to start again? *I* don't care; they can capture me, if that's what you want—to get me three years in jail, out of love! . . . *I*'m not going to starve, old girl; I'm going to take all I can lay my hands on. I want money to go on with, and I'm going to have it."

"No—no—no!" moaned Tilly, clinging on tightly. "No, you shan't take a thing of theirs—you shan't leave me as black as yourself—no!"

"Let go!" With an upward jerk of his elbow under her chin, he drove her back—ready to strike again. "Now, then! Know better than to scream out, don't you? *You* let me in here, I say; and they can see it for themselves, if you like. If you'd been different to me, and given me something to work for at the start, p'raps I shouldn't have come down to this pitch! I wanted you; I came after you fair enough; and you wouldn't have me. See what you've got by it!"

One more pause. No, he did not fear!—not in the least. He was sure enough of his hold upon her thus far! Quite coolly, leisurely, he picked up the bag and began slipping the booty into it.

"Yes, you can go mad," he scoffed, glancing up at her face from time to time. "Better by half hold yourself in a bit longer, though," he was uneasy enough to add. "If I swim, you can swim, too—you can come off with me. If I sink——"

The bag dropped, with a perilous metallic thud. The breath was well-nigh strangled from Bert's body as her arms came round him again.

"Bert!" she gasped, with fire in her eyes. "I won't believe it. You're not a thief—not to-night—not here! You've still got *me!* . . . You did care for me a little —a little! You're going to drop it all on the spot—

leave everything for me to put back before daylight. Yes, you are!"

"What's going to pay me?" he asked, standing very still in spite of himself.

"Can't I?—can't I?" he heard. Her arms tightened and tightened in the abandonment of hope; her voice sounded delirious. "You wanted me—you said it. Yes, make me believe that! . . . Don't rob them—and don't say I brought you to this! . . . If you won't go because I ask—if you mean that I might have saved you from it—if it's my arms round you that might keep you from it to-night. . . ."

"Where are we? What did you do?" Bert Lovell asked, under his breath, like one momentarily dazed.

"Turned out the light—taken the key away!" said Tilly, in the same suppressed, semi-delirious way.

She had pushed open her bedroom door, let go of his arm, and cowered away quickly.

"Oh, all right then," Bert muttered, stepping in. "Have it your own way; I don't mind. Suppose we should have come together sooner or later—was to be!"

He had recovered himself. He laughed, gave that automatic hitch of his trousers again, dropped into the only chair, and leaned forward comfortably, with a cigarette between his lips.

"No—no!" Tilly swept down upon him and struck at the cigarette. Then, as he held it away ironically—significantly—she turned and flung the bed-coverlet over the door, wedging it between the upper crevices with hat-pins snatched from her dressing-table. Then, as if exhausted by the successive rushes of dread, she sank down upon the edge of the bed.

"Get in; don't mind me; you'll take cold," Bert said,

sententiously. "We won't make a lot of fuss about nothing; I'll have my smoke out."

He crossed his legs and sat back, as with a slight concession to her feelings. He was shrewd enough to see that she did not know quite what she had done—that a mistaken move on his part might awaken her prematurely. The requisite thing was airy coolness.

"I reckon you've 'had' me," he said, flicking some ash to the floor. "That was a decent little haul downstairs, old girl. Take you some time to put all straight again—unless you're going to do the sensible thing, and come right away with me at daylight, and leave 'em to make what they like of it. Why not?"

Tilly gazed at him with unseeing eyes, clearly not fully comprehending. And yet, when he merely lifted a hand to pass it upward over his face, the moan was ready on her lips.

"No—no! Don't move—oh, don't move!"

"You fool!" he retorted, stung to it. "What do you take me for? I'm going to move in a minute, or I'll know why not. You can't get out of *this,* can you? You put me to it; and now we'll stand by it."

She said something to herself mutely, shivered—and shrank in terror, as he rose.

"It's all right," he said, soothingly. "Just going to put something round you—that's all; not going to scare you. It isn't every man that 'ud give you as long as you like to calm yourself. There, what's the matter with that?"

He had folded the blanket around her shoulders. He went so far as to draw his lips along her forehead, and then returned to his chair, feeling for another cigarette.

"Mind you," he said, "I'm not going to be tricked—don't think it. If you didn't mean it, I do. . . . And don't think that I shall want to throw you off. I'll get a job of some sort, now it's come to it; and I'll promise

you don't want for a crust, old girl; I'm not so far gone, that I can't pull myself together somewhat, if I want—if I've got solid reason. Otherwise—well, I'm not quite such a mug as to work hard while I can 'wangle' a living anyhow else. Others don't; ditto me."

"Would you—would you promise to go right away, and begin afresh somewhere—and *mean* it?" Tilly asked, in a faraway whisper.

He folded his arms, and drew a breath as in disdain for heroics.

"No," he said briefly, after a pause. "No, I wouldn't; I wouldn't bind myself down to anything of that sort. Quite good enough if I say I'll do my best by you. . . . Don't sit there staring at me like that—keep to your word! I tell you straight——"

"Wait!" said Tilly, with a dry choke. "Be kind to me, Bert—be kind! I don't know what I'm doing. . . . If I've deceived you—got you up here with a lie. . . ."

"You haven't," put in Bert. He curled the smoke decisively from his nostrils. "You haven't. That's all right; that's for me to say now. Pity I showed you the pistol; any one 'ud think I was going to count a thousand and then take your life. As it happens, it's a dummy." He glanced around. "Tell you what," he said, pointing. "You can have till that candle goes out. There you are!—that's handsome—that's settled. And if you start making any fuss then, well—! You'll have to account for the stuff downstairs and me in your room in the bargain. See?"

"Yes—yes!" whispered Tilly, feverishly. "Thank you, Bert—thank you!"

"Give us a kiss, then, to make sure! Only just a kiss—that's cheap!"

He bent over her. She held the blanket tightly over her breast, but fought against the cowering instinct this time, and put up her face obediently. He cooed,

and caressed, and essayed the physical hypnotism of sex—but was pushed away.

"You said—you said, till the candle went out!" implored Tilly, with the look of a child terrified in the night. He was temporarily baffled, and, with a little laugh, dropped back into his seat. There was full an inch of the candle left. He had made a misguided compact.

"Where might they sleep?" he asked. "Under here? A living marvel they haven't heard something. Still, I don't care a hang, if you don't."

Tilly struggled to think, and pointed outward toward the landing. "No—under there!"

Having answered him, having forced her mental faculties to work a little, she seemed afraid to let the silence fall again.

"Are you—are you living in the same place—the same room?" she got out tremblingly.

"Oh, no," he replied. "You'll see—when you see it. That got too hot, long ago; I've made several shifts since then. Decent little room I've got, though—not so far off the old show, and no questions asked. Why?—what's that matter?"

"And how long—what made you take up with such a life as you are living?"

Bert yawned, and smoothed the back of his head. He was getting a little disgusted at his own incredible restraint.

"Ask me another. I fell among thieves, as they say, and couldn't get away again. Still, I haven't done much on my own; there's nothing much scored against me. I was hard up; and this little affair to-night came quite natural and easy, like, as you were on the spot, and had told me a bit of something useful about the place——"

She put a hand to her forehead, and stared past him.

"So that's—so that's why you came after me—just to find out how to get into the place and rob them. . . ."

"Oh, no," said Bert, quickly. "I was on your heels long before that, if you talk sense. I only got this little idea later—when I'd made up my mind you didn't care a rap about me." Some recollection tickled him—or else he wanted to draw her away from that unpleasant point. He slapped his thigh. "My word, we had a game to rights just lately with some one you used to know—old Blowhard! Old Kingdom!"—as she gazed blankly. "Ran the rule fairly over him, we did."

"You did?" she echoed, in slow, recurring horror. "Old Mr. Kingdom—robbed him?"

"Not half," said Bert, not wholly vicious, but plunging from recklessness to recklessness in sheer devilry. "At least, not a job like this; couldn't bring that off—you saw me planted on the watching lay outside his place, didn't you? Yes; the gang had a grudge against him, and worked him up properly. I'll tell you about it some day—to-morrow, p'raps. You're not likely to blab anything—not now. Don't care how hard a woman is on a chap—she wouldn't want to get him three years'. . . . Now, then, old girl, enough o' this rot—say when!"

Tilly seemed to have sunk into a mental and physical stupor. She came to actuality with a convulsive start, as he leaned over the candle.

"Wait!" came her muffled cry. "Bert!"

"I shan't wait," he retorted, suppressedly savage. "This blessed thing won't go out, and you know it; I'm going to *put* it out."

"Bert!"

She had risen, and clutched at his hovering arm. There was something in her widened eyes that he did not understand—that checked him, at any rate.

"Well, what?" he sneered. "Don't you think I'm flesh and blood. . . ."

"Stop!" she panted. "Stop! . . . There, it's all over; I'll go. I'll go with you—yes!"

He was rooted—speechless—chilled with chagrin, as she stepped back, threw a petticoat over her nightdress, fastened it, drew on over that her skirt and blouse, buttoned the buttons, stooped for her shoes—and faced him, drawn up, with deadly calm and determination that did not seem to belong to little Tilly Westaway, but to some metamorphosis of herself.

"There!" she repeated steadily—too steadily, if he could fathom it. "Now you're satisfied! I'm done; I'm what you've tried hard all along to make me! I couldn't face them again—I'm hand-in-glove with the thief; I'll go with you—now! . . . Give me five minutes—you can spare me that. Five minutes!—then we'll go, and you shall have all you drove me to give you!"

He turned, as she turned. The candle was all but exhausted. Mouth open, nostrils twitching, hands clenched impotently, he watched, as she drew from somewhere a bag—the old carpetbag in which she had first conveyed her few belongings from Porter Street to Highbury. He could not tell in the least whether she had merely clutched at a subterfuge, to "blind" him, or whether, in the belief that Fate held every loophole closed, she had surrendered herself body and soul to the downward swoop.

She knew what she was doing, so far—that seemed clear. She was cutting herself off deliberately from these surroundings. Now and then she even paused for an instant to think. A sob sounded—and then she was smiling to herself. "All over!—all over!" he heard her whisper twice. Into the bag she pushed what looked to be bundles of letters, and then two or three trinkets, and a few articles of clothing from a drawer. It was swiftly, composedly, done; and soon the bag

clicked, and she drew on her hat and jacket, and was ready.

"Now!" she told him, with dry lips. "I tried hard at one time to think you meant it, and might become a a man—now I'll prove it. Open the door!"

He scowled sullenly, took down the hanging coverlet, and then with care drew open the door. For the instant it was he who seemed afraid to take the next step forward; he looked back at her with hesitant suspicion.

"Go on," said Tilly, with a weary gesture. "I'm coming!"

He felt his way down by the balustrade, and she followed close behind. At the dining-room door, indeed, he made as if to pause, with a silent tempting query; but Tilly doubled back his groping arm fiercely.

"Would you!" she breathed. "You dare! You're not a thief—not from now!"

She drew back the bolts herself, opened the hall door, and gave him her bag to hold. For an instant, as the cool outer air puffed in and seemed to remind her that she was dually upon a threshold, she faltered—then turned quickly. With a sharp click the door closed. A little moan, and she caught at Bert's arm.

"Quick—quick! Don't let them find me—I couldn't face them again!"

"I'll see they don't do that," said Bert lightly, sure at least of his hold now. "Steady, old girl; take it easy; hang on to me. I shan't play fast and loose with you. . . . Now, then, don't look as if we'd been up to something. Step it out!"

He looked back uneasily several times; but nothing happened. In a few minutes, without seeing a soul, they had reached Essex Road, Islington. A constable stood stiffly still at the corner of Balls Pond Road, and eyed them as they approached; but Bert talked uncon-

cernedly, and Tilly moved like one in a trance, seeing nothing.

"He might think of us in the morning—if he hears anything," Bert laughed. "No, it wouldn't do for you to go back there now, would it? Want a lot of explaining. Buck up, old dear; you'll be all right—you won't have to slave for a few shillings a week, now I've got something to say in it."

Tilly seemed to tremble; but she said nothing.

"Ah!" he remarked, as a coffee-stall came in sight at the corner of the long Kingsland Road. "A cup o' coffee and new life! You won't?" She had shivered again. "All right, be obstinate, I will; I want something; I'm not used to this. Keep still just a moment."

He gulped down the cup of coffee, and brought her back a cake, which she pushed away. With some stifled word, Bert tossed the cake into the gutter.

They crossed the road. A solitary taxi-cab stood outside Dalston Junction Station; Bert put two fingers to his mouth to whistle shrilly, a man sprang, and the cab came gliding up. As if overwhelmed, Tilly allowed herself to be lifted in.

"Mile End Gate!" directed Bert; and away glided the cab. "That ain't too near," he said. "We can walk the rest; just as well to dodge 'em a little."

Tilly sat passive, her head back, her eyes closed. Once or twice Bert got hold of her hand, and once tried to draw her head on to his shoulder; but there was no apparent response—no encouragement. Bert said something to himself again, and fell back upon his cigarettes—with now and then an attempt to laugh at what seemed a whimsical turn of events.

"Now, then," he repeated, as the cab wheeled and left them standing on the pavement of Mile End Road. A rose-pink dawn was just broadening out in the sky. "Come right to your senses, Tilly. You can't go back,

so you must go on, mustn't you? Be a bit like a woman, then; I'm not carting about any lumps of ice—and not paying for their keep, either."

"You needn't," she surprised him by saying, very quietly, very rationally. "You've got me here, but I know what I've done now. I've paid enough—more than enough—for ever being so weak as to trust you. But p'raps I will trust you just this once more! . . . If I come a step farther, are you going to make me a wife?"

"What!" he muttered, staring, staggered.

She stood firm, and held away his tugging arm.

"No, Bert; you heard; I'm going to know. That's not much to ask, if you do care for me at all. Are you going to let me hold my head up in the world that much? If not . . . *could* I help you to try and be a man, if I've shown myself not fit for the name of a woman?"

"Oh, that's the move, is it?" he mused after the prolonged pause. "I see! Think you've got me in a good corner, don't you? You're a lying little fraud—that's what you are; but you won't——"

"No," she said, just as quietly. "If I was that, Bert—if I wanted to get out of it like that—I could call a policeman, and stand up in the witness-box against you, couldn't I? I said I'd go with you, and I've come; but I want just to know whether you think enough of me to keep me honest. If not—that shows; I'm not worth having, am I?"

Bert smoked hard, and shrugged his shoulders, and passed a hand upward over his face several times.

"Oh, all right," he said, at length. "If that's all, we'll get married." And Tilly gave a little cry, and pressed his arm.

"When?—when?"

"First chance, of course," he replied, in surprise. "If I've said it, I've said it. Can't you trust me?"

"I must!—I must! That's all I ever wanted to do!"

They moved on. Presently Bert struck down a turning to the left, and began threading a maze of narrow side-streets that he appeared to know by heart. He did not seem to think it advisable to speak again, because, although she held his arm so tightly, almost preciously, she was weeping. And he, no less than most men, distrusted that sign in the circumstances.

"Here we are," he said, at last. "It's all right, petsy; I've got my key. Step in quiet; no one up yet!"

Tilly looked up. Her damp, misery-filled eyes tried to clear—tried to focus at least the appearance of the house; but Bert's key was turning hastily in the lock. He drew her in, and was closing the door—when, just ere it closed, Tilly's fingers somehow got a tight clutch upon it. A pause, and then an involuntary cry burst from her, as if she had but now realized in full that a longing for love is not love.

It was "Mother!" and it well-nigh stopped the beat of Bert's heart.

It came again—almost a scream—as he tried to prise away her hands: "Mother!"

"Hush up!" he hissed, in real fear. "You'll wake the place! This what you call trusting me?"

"I don't!" The word seemed to go like a flame through the darkness. "I don't!" She fought him tenaciously; her voice rose higher and higher, in wild sobs. "I couldn't! A man who deserted the Navy, would desert me!"

She struck backwards at his face, and wrenched her bag from his hands. With a last shudder, as his grip relaxed, she gained the pavement outside, and ran—ran—blindly ran.

CHAPTER XXXI

A MARKET-CART, laden with lilac, primroses and other fruits of Spring's fulfillment, rumbled past her, and left a trail of heavenly odors. Milk-floats darted to and fro; doors opened and shutters rattled; the deserted pavements gave back now the ring of quick footfalls; small noises were everywhere, merging by degrees into one great inchoate sound. The bed of pink in the sky had faded away, and the sun was forging up a dome of speckless blue.

It was a quarter-past six o'clock; so that for hours she had wandered the streets—at first distraught, then benumbed and incredulous of her position, and finally with but an utter physical weariness and a sense of having cast away all that she had striven to attain. And now, almost unconsciously, she was taking the one step that, short of wickedness, seemed left to her. This was Stepney High Street; and she was making for The Row.

The Row! The dear old Row—the terrible old Row! At that hour of the morning people had no time to turn and look at her. Like one without a friend or hope, clutching still the old carpet-bag, she moved draggingly along. Now and then she half paused, and gazed back toward the North; but the hand of Inevitability seemed to remain upon her shoulder—it turned her each time and impelled her on.

"Well, to be sure, now!—to be sure!" said a timid little voice. "I said to myself—'That looks very like

little Tilly Westaway coming along; but it couldn't be! And it is!"

With the mechanical echo of a sob Tilly drew up, for the moment seeing no one, but merely recognizing a voice. Then she knew that it was the small figure of Mrs. Kingdom, who had opened her side-door twelve inches to reach out for the can of morning milk.

"To be sure!" repeated Mrs. Kingdom, her head shaking away. "Going home, dearie?—have you come all that way this morning? But you're looking very, very poorly, dear, aren't you?"

"I'm going to mother," said Tilly, brokenly. "I'm going back to mother!"

"Yes, yes!" said the little woman, looking at her very wistfully. "That's right enough; I might have known. Does mother know?"

"Not—yet!" gulped Tilly, ready to break down, yet shrinking away. "I—I've got to tell her."

She was moving on. With just a quick glance around, and another down at the hem of her nightdress—very visible beneath the folds of a handy shawl—Mrs. Kingdom made a courageous little pounce, and caught her arm. Before Tilly knew anything more, she was inside, and the door had closed.

"Now, it's not so long, dearie," whispered the little woman penetratively, "since I told you to look upon *me* as a mother, if need be. What is it you've got to tell her? Nothing that you're afraid of, I will say!"

The bag dropped from Tilly's hold; her hands clasped, and she looked into space with piteous eyes.

"I'm not what I was," she said. "That's all!—and I've come back—I've said good-bye to everyone and everything!"

"Well, come, now, are any of us what we might be?" asked Mrs. Kingdom, quickly, almost cheerily. "Don't we one and all have our 'times'? There's no need to

point the finger at yourself like that! Here, dearie—I've left the kettle boiling away. Just come up; there's no one there. It's strange if you can't have a cup of my tea when it's ready—when your hands are as chilly as this!" And, somehow or other, she got Tilly up the stairs, and into the great front room with the stuffy smell of old horsehair furniture. "There, dear," she ran on, in the motherly, hushing way that Tilly had never drawn from her own parent, and that seemed to fall like a snowflake upon her parched mind. "Here's the very same chair that you sat in before, and that got you right off to sleep, with all the troubles forgotten! That's it! Now, then, suppose we just. . . ."

She slipped down to her knees, and drew Tilly's head on to her shoulder, and put a shrunken little hand over Tilly's eyes, and uttered a few subdued words of prayer. . . . And then she knelt and listened in sad awe, as the floodgates broke down, and Tilly's head rocked against her breast, and all the story was told. The kettle upon the fire, quite forgotten, seethed and spluttered away unheard.

"But you're safe, dearie!—you're quite safe, as far as it's gone," she said, soothingly. "You did the wrong thing, but then you did the right thing and wiped it out—or, you're going to. If we were all so strong, our world wouldn't be what it is—a pilgrim's progress. Why, you'll look back, dear, when you're as old as old Mrs. Kingdom, and you'll wonder! Because you had dropped back one step, you told yourself you must drop all the lot, didn't you, now? You've simply got to forget him, Tilly; and that's not hard, because I'm quite sure you've never loved him!"

"I thought I did—I'd hoped I did—but I saw in that minute what a mistake I'd made; and of a sudden I loathed him!" cried Tilly, faintly.

Her head bumped back, and her eyes closed. Little

Mrs. Kingdom drew very gradually away, stood thinking, and then folded the shawl softly about her.

"Don't move, dearie; lie there, and let it all slip away. Here's the night gone again, and the sunshine streaming in at the window once more. And depend upon it, it was meant to be!—that I should open my door down there at the right moment. Keep quite still, while I take my son's breakfast in to him. And then we'll see—then we'll see!"

She seemed to be gone with the breakfast a long, long time. A murmuring of voices filtered in to Tilly now and then, and traffic rumbled incessantly in the street below, and the sunshine from the window grew stronger and warmer, showing little specks of dust floating about in the room; but none of it seemed quite as real as usual. Tilly felt like one slowly recovering from a surgeon's operation—too weak to move, and just gazing out at a muffled world while the effects of the opiate wore away.

But presently—presently she became aware that some one was standing beside her chair. Presently a hand touched her shoulder tentatively, and fumbled along until it reached her neck. She could not move. It was as if she crouched upon a dividing line between the old life and a new, and this hand could push her back or draw her forward. . . . It was Bob Kingdom's big figure, and Bob Kingdom's hand.

"Wouldn't he marry you?" Bob's voice asked—ruminative as of old, but seeming to come from a distance.

Her eyes unclosed and looked up at him. She could not speak—could not even believe.

"He wouldn't, eh?" repeated Bob, as to himself.

The great hand slid on, and somehow worked its way round to her other shoulder. So thus it wanted but a contraction of the curved arm to draw her against him.

"Might be worse, eh?" muttered Bob, thoughtfully.

"Others about, so to speak. . . . Just wondering if—any good—me—chancing my arm—as the saying is?"

"Oh, Bob!" choked Tilly. She went to clutch at the arm, bit her lip hard, and looked away.

Bob Kingdom breathed very heavily for a time. Then he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and brought out something.

"Like this?" he asked. "Bought it a month or two ago. Thought p'raps you might fancy it some day or other—so to speak. . . . Kept it by me. Didn't care to touch on it too quick, like, not knowing how you felt. . . ."

It was a ring, with three small turquoise stones. Tilly smiled, even while silent sobs shook her from head to foot. Breathing more heavily still, Bob Kingdom got hold of her finger, and worked the ring down into place.

"Looks all right," he muttered. "Feel all right? Like blue? . . . Like the look o' that side just as well, eh? Dunno as I don't!"

He had turned the gold band so that the plain side was uppermost, and it had the appearance of a wedding-ring. As in a dream still, Tilly lay back and looked at it.

"Beautiful!" she said to herself, quite unknowingly. "Beautiful! Bob's hand put it there."

And Bob Kingdom straightened slowly up, with a breath as of vast relief and finality.

"All settled, eh?" he suggested, wiping his forehead. "No in-and-out game about that, eh? Now it's on, needn't come off. Feel a bit better now, eh?"

He was turning away.

"Mr. Kingdom," said Tilly, with a quiver.

She shut her eyes, and put out her arms.

"Bob!" she whispered.

And Bob Kingdom somehow managed it; and the arms all but met and clasped behind him. "Great big Bob,"

with the yearning little heart beating against him, found that moment something exceedingly wonderful—something that in all his ruminations he had never gone so far as to contemplate.

A little later, when he had gone, little Mrs. Kingdom bustled in, looking as though she knew nothing of any interval.

"Breakfast, Tilly!" she said. "You'll enjoy it now! You're looking worlds brighter and bonnier for that little doze!"

"Where is he?" asked Tilly, with another quiver. "Bob!"

"Bob?" echoed little Mrs. Kingdom, innocently. "Oh, he's had *his;* he never misses it, my dear—don't fear! Let's see!—he's written a few words to your people at Highbury, to explain, and gone off to see if they'll let him leave his work at two o'clock, instead of six. And then he said something about Barnet—you and him—for a breath of fresh air. What he does think of that Hadley Woods, wherever it is—well, I begin to think he must be in love with some one there. And who could wonder? For if he isn't soon, he never will be!"

THE END.

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